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Gordon D. Kaufman

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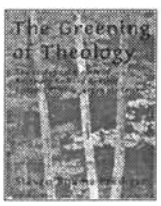

This volume examines the contributions of three contemporary theologians—Rosemary Radford Ruether, Joseph Sittler, and Jürgen Moltmann—to the development of Christian ecological theology. Against the charge that the Christian tradition is ecologically bankrupt, the author demonstrates the intellectual and spiritual resources available within Christianity for addressing ecological issues. Of particular interest are Ruether's doctrine of God and her emphasis on ecojustice, Sittler's cosmic Christology and reconception of the relation between nature and grace, and Moltmann's doctrine of the Holy Spirit and argument for social trinitarianism.

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COMMONWEAL

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No homosexual child, surrounded overwhelmingly by heterosexuals, will feel at home in his sexual and emotional world, even in the most tolerant of cultures. And every homosexual child will learn the rituals of deceit, impersonation, and appearance. Anyone who believes political, social, or even cultural revolution will change this fundamentally is denying reality.

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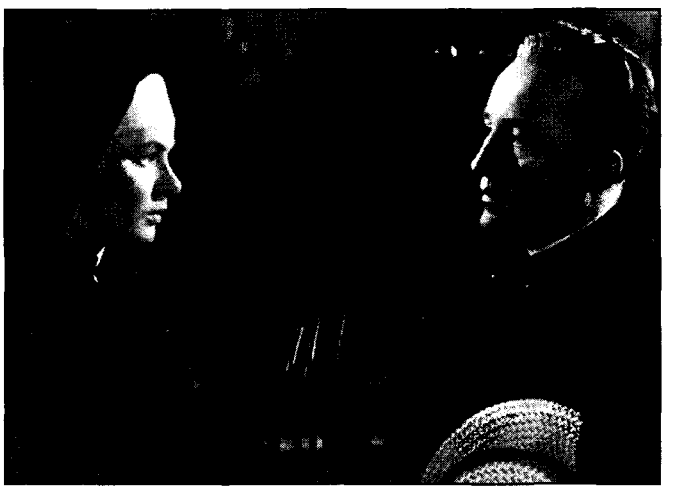

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To the Editors

War is hell, period

After studying your August 18 issue, I feel I must separate myself from you, at least for a while. Your editorial on the ending of the war with Japan was appalling! What do you think war is—an exchange of cream puffs at fifty paces between gentlemen? War is destruction and killing: destruction of everything and killing of everyone, and once it is declared, there is no guilt in retaliation! That is war, and the Japanese knew it when they attacked this country.

MARGARET H. MURRAY
Cincinnati, Ohio

Hiroshima remembered

Along with my renewal as a member of the Commonweal Associates, I want to send congratulations on your issue of August 18, and especially for your reprinting of the "Hiroshima 1945" editorial from the August 24, 1945 issue of *Commonweal*.

At the time of the Hiroshima bombing I was a young mother, at an early stage of my second pregnancy. The American people were not asked for their approval of the decision, and most of our friends, learning of it, were stunned and horrified, especially when details were (very slowly) revealed. The bombings confirmed me as an active "peacenik," as we were called in the '60s.

MARGARET BEAHON WINEGARDEN
Rochester, N. Y.

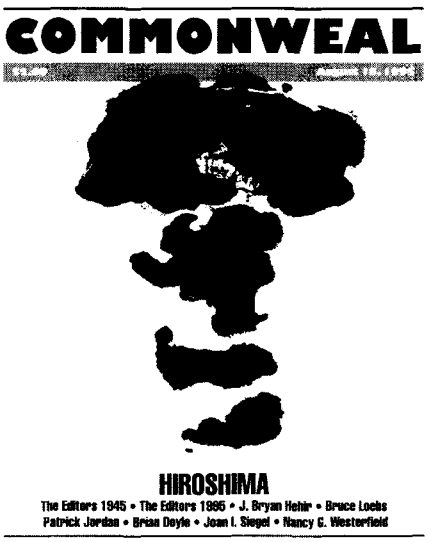
The dynamic of war

I do not stand by the corpse-and-casualty calculus of Bruce Loebs, and I do agree with J. Bryan Hehir and the editors on the principle of noncombatant immunity [August 18], but I suspect that our stance will never make much sense to Americans in general when they are engaged in warfare.

In a theater of war, not much attention is given to theological niceties. Whatever it takes, do it. Keep our body count down. Kill, rather than be killed. "They" would do it to us if "they" ever got the chance; don't give them the chance; wipe the enemy out first. And if that involves the indiscriminate bombing of cities, so be it. The enemy, in most people's minds, is not confined to the hostile armed forces. Can you imagine any military or civilian leader telling us: "I could have brought hundreds of thousands of your sons and daughters home alive, but I didn't do that, because I wanted to treat the enemy fairly in accord with the principles of the just-war theory that I learned in a Catholic classroom"?

To judge by interviews and letters to editors, a vast majority of Americans, at least in matters of war and economics, tend toward pragmatism, utilitarianism, consequentialism: If it works, do it. Church teaching may be correct in condemning such attitudes, but what should be is not what is. And we had better keep that in mind whenever we urge or condone a war between modern states. Father Hehir said it well: Wars "produce a dynamic that seeks to eliminate restraint." And how!

ANDREW GALLIGAN
Tracy, Calif.


COMMONWEAL
HIROSHIMA
The Editors 1945 • The Editors 1995 • J. Bryan Hehir • Bruce Loebs
Patrick Jordan • Brian Doyle • Joan I. Siegel • Nancy G. Westerfield

Face the consequences

The consequentialist approach to assessing the morality of total war (for example, large-scale attacks deliberately aimed at noncombatants)—defended by Bruce Loebs, criticized by J. Bryan Hehir in your issue of August 18—deserves to be judged by its own standard. Where does this consequentialist-pragmatic calculus lead us? Consider these results:

Terrorism: What the fire bombings of Dresden and Tokyo and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were *de magno*, all forms of terrorism are *de parvo*. The same principle rules: If, in the mind of the actor, the end is good, the means don't matter. Hamas may bomb an Israeli bus, the IRA may destroy a London department store, because they are acting against what they deem to be unjust oppression. If we accept consequentialism to justify our own acts, how can we condemn these others as "terrorists" just because their targets are civilians? And why shouldn't they follow our lead?

Abortion: Those who defend it focus all but exclusively on the end sought, the woman's (or the couple's) freedom of choice, the defectiveness of the fetus, the origin of the pregnancy (rape or incest)—but rarely or never on whether the act itself, the deliberate killing of the unborn, may be intrinsically evil. The consequence of this fixation on consequences has been a massive increase in the number of abortions at all stages of pregnancy; an outcome that even some proponents of abortion find disturbing.

Euthanasia: Helping sick people who are in pain kill themselves, or doing it on their behalf, either at their request or, as occurs in Holland, without their request, is justified by consequentialists solely in terms of the motive (kindness) and the result (an end of suffering). The ancient inhibition against killing, founded on the belief that it is simply wrong, is ignored. As the euthanasia movement

(Continued on page 30)

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A not-so-popular culture

It might be said, taking a cue from a famous definition of pornography, that popular culture is hard to define but we usually know it when we see it. More and more, people don't like what they see, and some argue that much of popular culture has even become a kind of pornography. That argument is put forcibly to *Commonweal* by John D. Hagen, Jr. (page 19). Hagen, rightly worried about the violence and nihilism evident in contemporary entertainment and art, calls Richard Alleva and Frank McConnell on the carpet for not writing more explicit moral critiques of movies and the media. In response, Alleva (page 21) and McConnell (page 23) attempt to clarify the difficult problem of where aesthetic judgment ends and moral assessment begins.

In the ongoing encounter between Catholicism and American culture, American Catholics have continually found their allegiances and moral judgment tested—not so long ago, after all, the idea of religious freedom was alien to Catholic teaching and the Legion of Decency limited what could be shown in movies. No final resolution of that tension seems possible. In our judgment, Catholicism remains as much in need of the sometimes anarchic virtues of American democracy as American democracy needs the spiritual and moral wisdom of Catholicism.

That dialectic is fully explored in an essay (page 10) by our favorite president emeritus (university president, that is), Dennis O'Brien. O'Brien asks, "What is possibly Christian, properly pagan, and plausibly dangerous in popular culture?" He concludes that the spiritual aspirations expressed in popular culture, and especially in rock 'n' roll music, are genuine and compelling. To further broaden this nettlesome debate, we asked four contributors (pages 16-19) to comment on the perceived antipathy between Catholicism and popular culture.

If a consensus emerges from these pages, it is that the relationship between Catholicism and the surrounding culture is complex and ambiguous. Yes, mass consumer society is manipulative and the commodification of human relations and affections an everpresent danger. Still, the democratization of culture and art has brought great energy, wit, and humanity to our shared entertainments. American popular music, the Broadway musical, the movies, jazz, and even the television situation comedy can be high expressions of the egalitarian spirit.

That does not mean, of course, that the cynical exploitation of sex and violence on TV, in the movies, or advertising should go unchecked. A sense of common morality must find expression even in the media marketplace. Criticizing the stylized pornography of Robert Mapplethorpe is not the same thing as censorship or philistinism. Public campaigns to suppress the violence and misogyny of rap music, the sexual provocation and transgression of advertising, or the vulgarity of radio "shock-jocks" are worthy of support. Averting our own eyes is not enough. Such public controversies about moral standards, most recently involving Time Warner and Calvin Klein, are a sign of social engagement and health, not encroaching puritanism or political repression. Despite what First Amendment absolutists contend, freedom of speech is not the same thing as freedom from moral censure.

That said, a healthy skepticism is needed when politicians like Pat Buchanan and Bob Dole exploit outrage about the media for partisan advantage. When it

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comes to the deteriorating tone of our common life, no one political camp is more guilty than another. Some, usually on the right, think the debasement of popular culture has been engineered by a nihilistic elite. Others, often on the left, fearful that a hostile majority wants to outlaw "deviant lifestyles," have embraced a form of moral agnosticism. Neither of these views comes to terms with the ongoing democratization of culture or the power of technology. Neither moral edict nor a rights-based libertarianism can take us where we need to go.

Mr. Hagen invokes John Paul II's warnings about a "culture of death," depicting a clash between elites contemptuous of "bourgeois culture and determin[ed] to wreck it" and "humbler folk confront[ing] increasingly uninhibited violence on the streets and in the schools." Hannah Arendt's description of how the stage was set for totalitarianism by a similar alliance between the mob and cultural elites in Weimar Germany is used by Hagen to buttress his argument.

Arendt's warning about the dangers of nihilism and the public celebration of vulgarity should be taken seriously. But her analysis in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* goes a step further. It was not the amorality of the mob or the sexual indulgence of the privileged that paved the way for Hitler, but the hypocrisy and political expediency of the bourgeoisie. The artistic nihilism of Weimar Germany was not mere perversity, Arendt wrote, but a mirror and a "justified" response to the "meanness" of a dominant bourgeois culture that "paraded publicly virtues which it did not possess in private and business life, but actually held in contempt."

Sound familiar? Arendt argued that the entrepreneurial classes "always assumed an identity of politics, economics, and society, in which political institutions served only as the façade for private interests." As a consequence, the necessary countervailing authority of political and civil life was denigrated and undermined. "The philistine's retirement into private life, his single-minded devotion to matters of family and career was the last, and already degenerated, product of the bourgeoisie's belief in the primacy of private interest," Arendt warned.

"It won't work. Too many ups and downs in our relationship."

The nation's current drift to the right politically is animated by a philosophy that also seeks to delegitimize our common public life and obligations. In resisting nihilistic art and even the culture of death, it is important not to mistake a pious reiteration of banalities for real morality. An ample space for moral questions in politics and culture is all to the good, but concern for morality must shape our social and economic responsibilities for one another as much as proscribe what we see on billboards and TV.

In truth, most of our popular culture is not decadent or violent, *but utterly banal*. If Arendt is right, nihilism first feeds off that banality, which is symptomatic of a larger retreat from social and political engagement. The difference between the naked and the nude, Kenneth Clark reminds us, is that the nude is suffused with social significance. Modern life often makes it difficult to embrace social meaning. Catholicism, which has long taught the primacy of the social in protecting human dignity, remains a great resource against such philistinism. Let's rely on that resource, but in doing so let's ask as much of ourselves as we do of those who flaunt their alienation. □

ET CETERA

GLENDON TO BEIJING ■ We were delighted on hearing that Mary Ann Glendon would head the Vatican delegation to the UN Conference on Women in Beijing. Glendon has published in these pages—and is professor of law at Harvard, married and the mother of three daughters, author of several important works in comparative law, most notably for general readers, *Abortion and Divorce in Western Law* (Harvard).

Where does she find the time?

Her appointment is an honor well earned and a choice well made. The Vatican's opposition to the language of reproductive rights is often poorly presented and inadequately represented. We do love little old men in black suits, but we're putting our money on Glendon's ability to receive a fair hearing at the conference and from most of the media.

In covering Glendon's appointment, the *New York Times* turned twice to its own counter-pope, Frances Kissling of Catholics for a Free Choice, for comments, and she twice spoke infallibly, declaring Professor Glendon more conservative than the pope (August 25 and 29). But our favorite comment (of the do-you-still-beat-your-wife-school) came from reporter Fox Butterfield: "Ms. Glendon still goes to Mass every Sunday." As conservative as the pope!

WESTERN CIV SAVED AGAIN ■ No sooner had John Leo (also a contributer to these pages and former associate editor) found a new series of Calvin Klein ads looking much like "opening scenes from a porn movie" (*U.S.*

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News & World Report, August 28-September 4) than the ads were withdrawn because the advertising "has been misunderstood by some." According to the company the teenage models in various states of undress and suggestive repose were actually meant to show "the spirit, independence, and inner worth of today's young people." How did Leo miss that?

DOYLE ALSO DOES GOOD ■ Kevin Doyle, once a *Commonweal* intern and an occasional contributor to these pages, is acting head of New York's Capital Defender Office, established to represent indigent defendants sentenced under the state's new death penalty law. Doyle previously worked in Alabama defending those convicted in capital cases. Fortunately he is on the same side of the issue as the *New York Times* (against), and reporter Jan Hoffman (August 31) found him pugnacious and charming. Bet he, too, still goes to Mass every Sunday.

BRING BACK MAPPLETHORPE ■ If you are a New Yorker with a strong yen to gaze upon an art work featuring four dead and decaying cows positioned to look as though they were copulating—well, sorry, not now, maybe next year. The work, conceived by the artist Damien Hirst and titled "No Sense of Absolute Corruption," was to have opened the season at a SoHo gallery, but ran up against the health codes of staid old New York City, even though, according to an account in the *Times* [August 4], the cows "were to have been hermetically sealed in a case of steel and glass, with tubes connected to carbon filters eliminating the smell of decay." The artist explained his work: "It's about sex and death. As the cows continue to decay, the meat becomes visually attractive and very colorful, which I like." His London dealer gave a different exegesis of this and other Hirst works: "These pieces represent the dark side of humanity." The SoHo gallery owner, commenting on a plan to install a new Hirst exhibit in March of 1996, said, "I didn't want to deflect attention from the fact that Damien is a serious artist." The serious artist told the *Times* what will replace "Absolute Corruption" next March: "Right now I'm working on a piece called 'Physics of Immortality,' which shows cows cut vertically and copulating from behind." What about that pesky health code? "This time the cows will be preserved in formaldehyde."

An artistic compromise. Ruins the whole concept. We won't go. Besides, Damien needs to spend some time on a farm.

GIVE US THAT OLD-TIME VULGARITY ■ What was *Commonweal*'s approach to the emerging youth and popular culture of thirty-plus years ago? Philip T. Hartung reviews the movie *Bye Bye Birdie* (April 19, 1963) in a critical but unflappable fashion. "Since I didn't see the stage production of *Bye Bye Birdie*, I shall not attempt to compare it to the movie, but surely this popular musical comedy couldn't have been as vulgar as the film version. The idea of kidding teen-agers, their speech, their dress, their persistent telephoning, and their fanatic adoration of a current idol is amusing enough; but the film camera, with its insistence on close-ups and a certain amount of realism, has brought this kidding down to a low level and seems to be pandering to the audience it hopes to kid....

"Most of the movie is rather old-fashioned stuff concerned with the tiresome devotion of swooning high school girls for Conrad Birdie, who looks even worse than you'd expect in a tight, gold lamé suit....What *Bye Bye Birdie* needs is a little more taste and some light touches to offset its materialism. As it stands, it's for the birdies."

Those were the days. □

OF SEVERAL MINDS

ABIGAIL McCARTHY

PULLING THE RUG OUT

Let's end child labor

We have become a dispirited people because we do not celebrate our victories—or even recognize them. This is the thesis of commentator Mark Shields. He elaborated on it in a summer's talk at a benefit for the Brewster Ladies Library Guild on Cape Cod—not a place where his thesis would attract the media attention it deserved. His talk, appropriately enough entitled "Optimism," cited one example after another of what our concerted efforts have achieved but of which we seem unaware.

Our effect on the environment is only one example but it is impressive. Twenty years ago the Great Lakes were polluted and dead or dying. Today they are clean. In 1970 three-fourths of our rivers were unswimmable and unfishable. Today they are clear and fisherman line the banks.

Today 99 percent of the lead that contaminated the air has been removed, largely by the control of auto emissions. When environmentalists first urged controls, both labor and management resisted and made dire predictions. Controls would bring the prices of cars beyond the range of competition. The industry would suffer. Workers would lose jobs. Today, surprisingly enough, despite the controls, Detroit companies, manufacturers of cars, are robust and alive and competing successfully with their foreign challengers.

How did these changes come about? Have we forgotten? First, caring people identified the problems. They gathered in groups and associations to do something about these problems. The groups

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coalescing became a movement. National awareness grew and a national consensus was formed. Legislation and regulation followed and things changed greatly for the better. Yet we fail to congratulate ourselves on this progress or take pleasure in it.

When we fail to celebrate what we have done, says Shields, we lose heart for the struggles which must yet come. The faith that we can overcome the injustices and the social ills we still face is weakened. We need the optimism bred by past victories to sustain us in gathering together to attack the evils we face.

It is important that we recover that optimism because common effort unites and inspirits people. Who involved can forget the heady days of the civil rights movement or the camaraderie engendered by the sit-ins, the freedom rides, the marches? Even now the heart lifts when we hear it sung again—"We shall overcome, we shall overcome some day!"

A similar cause crying out for our attention and our effort is the battle against worldwide child labor. Because of the globalization of the market place we have become passive collaborators in this widespread exploitation of hapless children. Too often what we eat, what we wear, what we use, is priced as it is because somewhere forlorn little ones drag out their days in dusty fields or in dingy factories and sweatshops.

Our attention has been called to the plight of these children by Robert A . Senser in *Commonweal* (October 8, 1993, August 19, 1994), the occasional television documentary, and by a few public-spirited reporters and columnists. Bob Herbert of the *New York Times* has written several of these columns. In his July 26 column, for example, he lists some of the American companies which benefit from children's sweatshops. They include The Gap, Eddie Bauer, Gap subsidiary The Banana Republic, J.C. Penney, and Levi Strauss—all, alas, outlets favored by liberals. We can refuse to buy but there are other means as well.

The Department of Labor issued a report *By the Sweat of Children: The Use of Child Labor in American Imports* "to identify any foreign industry and their host country that utilize child labor in the export of manufactured products from industry or mining to the U.S." (It also includes underage workers in *American*-owned companies which assemble goods abroad for export to this country.)

Our indignation and our responses have been slow to rise. But coalitions are forming and their boycotts and protests are beginning to take effect. To our shame, however, the most successful have been initiated not here but in South Asia where a coalition, funded in part by German organizations, is attacking the problem piecemeal, and in Germany itself where consumers have achieved a really significant effect on one of the most ancient forms of child labor—the manufacture of hand-knotted carpets. This industry, once centered in the Mid-East, is now worldwide, extending from Egypt and Morocco to India and Nepal, and blights the lives of hundreds of thousands of children.

"For the first time ever," says Darlene Adkins of the Child Labor Coalition, "consumers can choose hand-knotted carpets made without child labor." They are made under the Rugmark label in India. A surcharge of 1 percent of the value of the carpet is assessed for a Unicef-administered program to educate and rehabilitate former child workers. Whether we are carpet buyers ourselves or not, those who see the promotion of Rugmark as a giant step in the fight against child labor ask our help. A Rugmark activist's organizer kit is available from the Child Labor Coalition, c/o National Consumer's League, 1701 "K" St., N.W., #1200, Washington, DC, 20006; phone (202) 835-3323. The goal is to convince retailers and importers to make Rugmark carpets available in the United States. Let us summon the energy fueled by our own past victories to join others in liberating the children of the world. Past history shows that we can effect great change if we will. □

OF SEVERAL MINDS

DAVID R. CARLIN, JR.

A LIBERAL CATHOLIC TAXONOMY

Or was that a Catholic liberal taxonomy?

In the November 18, 1994, issue of *Commonweal* the editorial was titled "Liberals & Catholics," and its opening words asked this pertinent question: "Can Catholics be liberals?" (The question was especially pertinent since, just a few weeks earlier, the majority of American Catholics had voted Republican in the congressional elections.) After answering, not surprisingly, that Catholics can be liberals, the editors promised to discuss the question again in the future. (*See* also my column of December 16, 1994.)

If we want to investigate the compatibility of liberalism and Catholicism, it is essential to bear in mind that not all who are both liberal and Catholic are of the same type. It would be helpful to sort out these types, to develop a liberal/Catholic taxonomy. So here is a modest contribution toward such a taxonomy. What I offer are "ideal types," Platonic forms as it were. Of course, no individuals perfectly conform to any particular type, only more or less approximate it.

Catholics who are liberal can be divided into two groups: "Catholic liberals" (CLs) and "liberal Catholics" (LCs). That is to say, among people who are both liberal and Catholic, some (the CLs) stress the liberal aspect of their identity, while others (the LCs) stress the Catholic aspect. The former are liberals first and Catholics second, the latter Catholics first, liberals second.

CLs can be divided into two categories according to how they respond

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to conflicts between Catholicism and conventional liberalism. When such a conflict arises (for example, on abortion), one CL subtype opts for the liberal position and rejects the Catholic position. Let us call people of this kind "Catholic liberals of the pure type" (CL-P). When I say they reject the Catholic position, I don't mean they come right out and say so. Usually CL-Ps finesse their rejection of the Catholic position, offering a theory whose purpose is to disguise this rejection (for example, "I am personally opposed but..." or "separation of church and state" or "you can't legislate morality").

The other CL subtype responds to liberal-Catholic conflicts by allowing the Catholic position to have a veto over the liberal position. Let us call these people "Catholic liberals of the qualified type" (CL-Q). In doing so they don't renounce their liberal identity, not even temporarily. They remain more liberal than Catholic, proof of which is found in their unwillingness to become champions of the Catholic position they profess to uphold; for if they were to fight for this position they would place themselves in open opposition to their liberal comrades, thus jeopardizing their liberal credentials. So they quietly dissent from liberal dogma at these points of conflict, saying to their liberal allies: "You know I'm with you on everything else, but I can't go along on this; after all, it is my religion. I hope you'll understand."

The CL-Q reminds us of a man who says to his mistress: "You know, my dear, I love you more than my wife, but I'd feel terrible if I skipped her birthday party. I hope you'll understand." The CL-P, by contrast, is like the man who says: "Don't worry, sweetheart, you can count on me; and frankly I don't give a damn what my wife thinks. In the meantime I'll cook up a story to explain why I'm coming home at three in the morning."

Liberal Catholics (LCs) can also be divided into two classes. On the one hand there are those who adopt the agenda of conventional liberalism and then try to find Christian justifications for that agenda. We may call them "liberal Catholics of the piggyback type" (LC-PB). They wait for secular liberals to do the hard work of defining the liberal agenda, and then jump on board with words something like these, "This agenda has the blessings of the Holy Spirit."

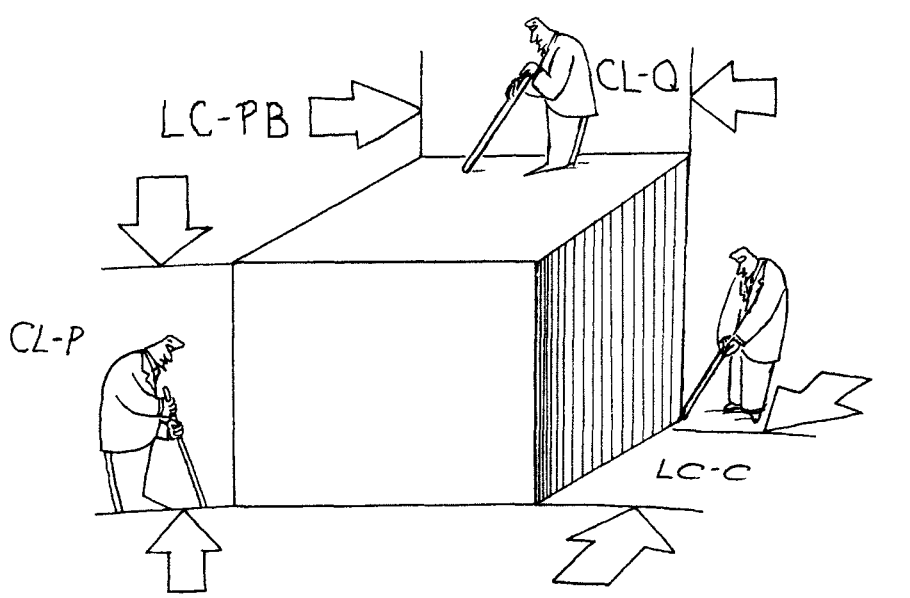
If the LC-PB starts with liberal conclusions and then searches, on a *post hoc* basis, for Catholic premises that will justify these conclusions, there is another kind of LC who does things the other way round. People of this kind start with Catholic premises and then try to figure out what liberal conclusions follow. We may call them "liberal Catholics of the critical type" (LC-C), since they are bound to be critical of the agenda of conventional liberalism. Conventional liberalism, which derives from premises of a secular (even a secularist) nature, will inevitably conflict with a liberalism that derives from Catholic premises. Hence LC of this type will have no choice but to be critical of much that passes for liberalism in the secular world. (This type, it should be noted, will often be mistaken for a conservative; for it is commonly assumed, almost as a matter of definition, that anyone who criticizes conventional American liberalism must be a conservative.)

In sum, we have four kinds of people who are both Catholic and liberal: (1) Catholic liberal, pure type (CL-P); (2) Catholic liberal, qualified type (CL-Q); (3) liberal Catholic, piggyback type (LC-PB); and (4) liberal Catholic, critical type (LC-C).

So now back to the editorial's original question: "Can Catholics be liberals?"—which I construe to mean not "Can Catholics as a matter of fact be liberals?" (for obviously they can be, since so many of them are), but rather "Can a logically consistent person be both liberal and Catholic?"

Of the four types, only type 1 holds a liberalism that is flatly and openly inconsistent with Catholicism. The other three are more-or-less consistent; but here a distinction needs to be made. Type 4 is strongly consistent, while types 2 and 3 are weakly consistent. Or to put this more emphatically, type 4 is truly consistent, while types 2 and 3 create the appearance of consistency.

Of course questions of logical consistency have to do with the intellectual side of religion only. In Christianity in general, and in Catholicism in particular, the intellectual side is enormously important, far more so than in most of the religions the human race has practiced. But it is not the only side; there is also the prayer side, the moral side, the ritual side, the feeling side, the organizational side, etc. Thus it is possible for a CL-P to be a dreadfully inconsistent Catholic from an intellectual point of view while leading a life of moral goodness combined with mystical prayer and big contributions to the bishop. □



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GOING WHICH WAY?

Catholicism & pop culture

Dennis O'Brien

Andrew Greeley claims that Catholicism has a peculiar allegiance to so-called "pop culture." He explains, "The other three great [religious] traditions [Protestant, Jewish, Islamic], each in their [*sic*] own way, are structured on sensibilities that emphasize the radical discontinuity of God and the world...[T]he Catholic religious sensibility sees the whole of creation as a metaphor: everything is grace."

Greeley finds grace everywhere from Bruce Springsteen's lyrics to Madonna's lingerie. The genius of Catholicism over the long centuries has been the ability to absorb local cults and enthusiasms. The Roman Januarius becomes San Gennaro, and the Celtic Bridgid, goddess of spring, reemerges as Saint Bridget of Kildare. It is important to recognize, however, that the traffic is two-way. Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, as Camille Paglia has noted, emerges naked from the sea in the posture of a medieval Madonna. Our contemporary Madonna of the Lingerie is not the first one to blur the lines between saint and siren.

But there are problems in appropriating the local cult and present popular culture to theological ends. Pathways between good old ecstatic paganism and Christianity abound, but it may be important to discover in which direction we are traveling. What is possibly Christian, properly pagan, and plausibly dangerous in popular culture? It is important to ask whose popular culture: the current generation's, the current younger generation's, the fans of golden oldies?

In 1944, Bing Crosby starred as Father Chuck O'Malley in *Going My Way*. The film won seven Oscars. Father Chuck, alias Crosby, made a deep impression on Catholic imaginations. In 1977, Fleetwood Mac's single "Go Your Own Way" sold 12 million copies. If *Going My Way* was popular culture for the decade of the forties, one can sense a radical change in pop just by song titles. What happens to popular music from Bing to the Beatles and beyond? Going whose way? My way, your own way, the way of Christ or Johnny Rotten of the Sex Pistols who proclaimed himself—for what that is worth—the Antichrist?

Start with the Crosby image of Father O'Malley. We first see him seeking directions to Saint Dominic's Church in black clericals and a straw boater. A peculiar combination of religious restraint and jauntiness which perfectly defines the developed character. It turns out that Father Chuck worked out with the Saint Louis Browns and led a small scat band in his previous existence. He may be a priest, but he is a real OK guy. There is even "romance." In a later scene an old flame, played by Risë Stevens, invites him to her dressing room at the Metropolitan Opera. While dressing in the adjoining room she asks through the open doorway why he had never answered her letters, "You wrote to me in Rome, Florence, in Naples, Vienna, Budapest...From there I went to South America. There were no more letters. What happened Chuck?..." As it happens, Chuck has been wrapped in a raincoat up to now so that Ms. Stevens has not seen the clerical collar. She emerges from the dressing room: "What happened Chuck? What hap—." She sees the Roman collar, beams in surprise, "*Father* Chuck!" Father Chuck knows all the American ways of sports, jazz, and romance—but from another life.

"Gerald was growing old gracefully until he read the average age of the Rolling Stones is two years older than him!"

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Father Chuck's actions in the film express a sort of magical priestliness as he solves every problem great and small from the finances of Saint Dominic's to street gangs. The problems are solved in disguise, as it were, just as the straw boater disguises his true priestly power. Novelist and critic Mary Gordon writes:

> Father O'Malley's great gift is to see everyone's need and provide for it. He is infinitely flexible, infinitely equipped with resources.
>
> He's both the ideal father and the ideal mother, nurturing yet with access to power, particularly in the sacred American precincts of show business and sports. Although his aura is maternal, his identity is necessarily and inextricably connected to maleness....His maleness is iconic, but it is a particular kind of maleness cut off from the implications of sexual demand.

Desexualized power, the iconic male capacity to fix things as if it were all improvised on the spot, a lucky accident, a spot of grace, expressed in the nonchalant manner of the Groaner, Der Bingle. In the sequel film, *Bells of Saint Mary's*, Father Chuck reassures a distraught Sister Ingrid Bergman that when in trouble she need only dial "O" for O'Malley. Mary Gordon reports on a priest friend who claimed that for generations, Father Bing was the paradigm for priests. So be it for the "golden oldies," but I suspect that somewhere in the passing years, Father Chuck's line has been disconnected.

It is not just the magical power of Father Chuck that attracts. Consider the message in the music written for the film by Johnny Burke and Jimmy Van Huesen. All the songs are songs of "aspiration," cultural uplift, and "deferred gratification." The Academy Award winning "Swinging on a Star" is sung by a street gang converted into the Saint Dominic's choir. The point of the song is that if you don't go to school, you may grow up to be a mule. On the other hand, attention to the books, and you "could be swinging on a star." If you are "going my way" "...this road leads to "rainbowville." Gratification is deferred—"happiness is down the line."

The most interesting message for this priestly story is in the first song of the film. The local very Irish cop brings to the rectory a young girl who has run away from home. The cop is afraid that she may end up, ahem!, on the streets. The girl tells Crosby that she will make it on her own as a singer. Father Chuck offers to give her a tryout to his accompaniment. The girl sings the song with some awkward "jazzy" gestures. Father Bing tells her to put heart into the song and he shows her how. The song reads, "The day after forever/ All through a lifetime/ I'll be loving you/ And on the day after forever/ I'll begin again."

Again the dominant theme of gratification deferred. Just as Father Chuck's "romantic life " is elsewhere in another time and place, so fulfillment is elsewhere: Take a short cut to what you wish and you may end up as a fish, happiness is down the line, and love is not just today, it is "the day after forever." So, if you are going my way, the destination is tomorrow, not today.

The songs in *Going My Way* are in no way idiosyncratic; they are wholly within the Tin Pan Alley tradition which dominated American popular music down to the revolution of rock 'n' roll. Briefly put, Tin Pan Alley's great composers, often Jewish immigrants trained in traditions of European operetta, wrote music of cultural aspiration and deferred gratification.

If deferred gratification, cultural uplift, and commitment to the day after forever are the metaphysics of Tin Pan Alley and the theme song of Going Father Chuck's Way, all this changes radically for contemporary rock culture. Happiness is not "down the line," in the words of two best-selling albums of the Rolling Stones, it is *Satisfaction* and *Now*. A lyric by Robert Hunter, one of the principal writers for the legendary band The Grateful Dead, states the themes of rock. The song is called "Aim at the Heart" and the message seems the very antithesis of "the day after forever":

> Time doesn't fly
> Just hangs over like the sky
> It's we who go by
> Makes no difference how or why
> Everything you cherish
> Throws you over in the end
> Thorns will grab your ankles
> From the gardens that you tend
> Damned if you do

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Double damned if you don't try
Caught on the fly
Hello fades into good-by
...
What can you say?
Here tomorrow, gone today
Faith fades away
For idols with their feet of clay

The chorus is: "Aim at the heart/ Don't ask whose love you're stealing." I am certain that swinging Father Chuck would be horrified by the *carpe diem* of Robert Hunter's lyrics. Hunter's world is as fragile and transient as the title of his 372 pages of collected lyrics, *A Box of Rain* (Viking Penguin).

Plato says in *The Republic* that changes in musical style indicate profound changes in the culture. For this reason he is determined to prevent the advent of the Lydian mode into his ideal state. Rock music broadly conceived is one of those radical changes in musical style that deserves notice for what it promotes—especially what it might promise or deny to religious sensibility. What does rock culture suggest: a new religion, an emotional collectivism which will rule the world (Peter Townshend of Who), or "overblown nonsense" (Mick Jagger)?

It seems clear enough from title alone that *Going My Way* and Fleetwood Mac's "Go Your Own Way" inhabit different emotional territories. Everyone has listened to enough rock—willingly or not—to have some idea of the musical character of such songs. Clearly this is not Crosby crooning "the day after forever." It is, as music critic Greil Marcus has written, "an assault, a hammering...moaning, pleading, damning...."

The religious question I want to ask is contained symbolically in Marcus's description of the music. It is, he says, "rough, harsh, hard to follow." As spiritual advice, is "going your own way" rough, harsh, a prescription hard to follow? Does "going your own way" lead to traumas and tragedies well beyond the gentle comic life of "going Father Chuck's way" where the burden is easy and the yoke is light?

Sam Phillips, the legendary producer of Sun records out of Memphis, the discoverer of Elvis Presley, characterized rock as the music of disillusion—"the passion of a moment that was meaningless." Jimi Hendrix stated its metaphysic: "I am what I feel." If, as Robert Hunter says, "Faith fades away/For idols with their feet of clay," life is something "caught on the fly."

On its face, it would seem that rock is not only distant from the Saint Dominic's of Father O'Malley but from the saint himself and the dominant Christian tradition. One could dismiss rock as mere paganism all over again. But if old paganism became new gospel, maybe there is something in the new Eleusinian mysteries worth recapturing for the Old Time Religion.

In Marcus's description of "Go Your Own Way," he tries to explain why an instrumental solo, normally a "rest" in the performance, is suddenly a burst of even greater energy:

> Building in any successful rock 'n' roll record is a sense of the power of the singer to say what he or she means, but also a realization that the words are inadequate to that task, and the feeling of fulfillment is never as strong as the feeling of frustration....The singer still comes up short; the performance demands the absolute lucidity it has already promised...and so an instrument takes over. It is a relief, a relief from the failure of language. The thrill is that of entering a world where anything can be said, even if no one can know what it means.

Having described how music finally transcends verbal message, Marcus goes on to discuss a hokey song called "(What's So Funny 'Bout) Peace, Love and Understanding," as performed by English rocker Elvis Costello with some simple, nonsinging, chord changes on his guitar.

> Not only is the built-in hokiness of the tune diverted, the irony is boiled off; the guitar notes don't neutralize the pathos of the lyrics, they validate it. What's so funny about peace, love, and understanding? Now, nothing. For an instant, the search for peace, love and understanding is what life is all about. You come back into the ordinary world, the world of ordinary language, with a wonderful story: "I saw it! I heard it!" "What was it?" everyone asks, and you open your mouth, and begin to wave your hands in the air.

Imagine the Apostles preaching on the street corner, certain that peace, love, and understanding is what life is all about. "I saw it! I heard it!" Someone begins to write it out: the New Testament with lyrics by Matthew, Mark, Luke & John. But suppose the original experience was validated where language broke down, and some elemental music of life allowed one to believe that even after an experience of defeat, betrayal, and death, "peace, love and understanding" is what life is all about.

Traditional Christian theology argued that the noble Greek virtues—courage, temperance, justice—were, after all, only "splendid vices" in comparison to the distinctly Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love. This is a defensible claim only if the life of the spirit is our fundamental human reality. The theologian John Dunne, in *Time & Myth* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), traces the life of the spirit in Dante's journey from Hell to Paradise. The stages of that journey reflect the basic possibilities of spirit. Somewhat revising Luther's characterization: Hell is despair; Purgatory is hope; Heaven is certainty. Spirit contains the fundamental "mood" of life.

The traditional moral virtues may have their place, but for the Christian the fundamental issue is whether they dwell within the spirit of despair, hope, or certainty. Macbeth despairs: life is "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing" but for all that, he is courageous. One may dispense justice as a futile gesture of despair, or with a certainty that the heavens rejoice in the doings of the just.

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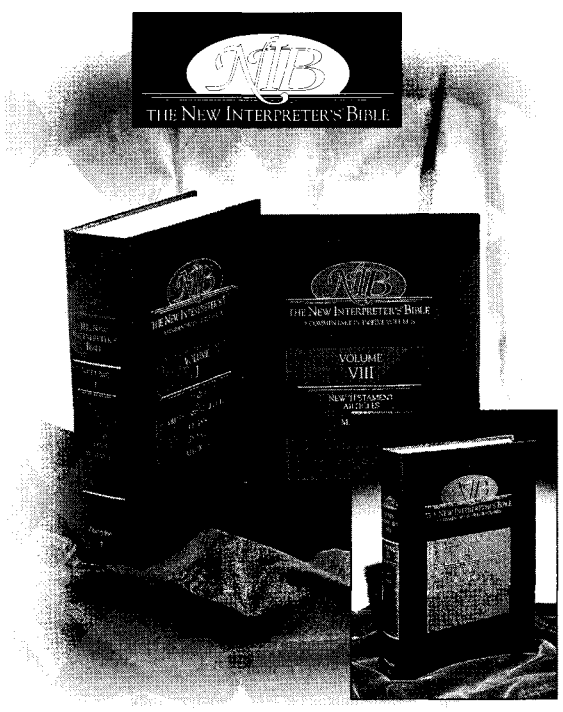
Because despair, hope, certainty lie behind the acts of every day, setting the tone if not content of life, we can, as it were, fail to notice them; we fail to recognize the life of the spirit.

Because the life of the spirit, the mood and music of life, is so fundamental, we properly label it as "mystery." I mean by mystery not something hidden from knowledge, like the cure for AIDS, but something so revealed, so present, that we cannot distance ourselves sufficiently for proper appraisal. Gabriel Marcel defines mystery as "a problem which encroaches on its own data." Assessing my spiritual state fits that description, am I hopeful examining my hope?

The contrast between Tin Pan Alley's *Going My Way* and the rock experience of "Go Your Own Way" is a contrast between morality and mystery. *Going My Way* as movie and song moves in the world defined by morality. Will stingy banker Gene Lockhart relent on the mortgage to the church? Sexual morality as sexual restraint is a central issue in the celibate state of the priests and the temptations of the runaway and her boyfriend. Father Chuck is ultimately a moral magician who shows everybody that if you don't care a feather or a fig, you may grow up to be a pig. He is magical because conversion to proper conduct requires only a slight symbolic gesture. Since there is little enough morality these days to go around, I am not going to knock it no matter how it is achieved, but I do want to say a good word for mystery.

Sexual restraint is central to *Going My Way* not only as a good in itself and a sign of priestliness, but as the most striking example of gratification deferred in the formation of moral character. Post the rock revolution, sexuality is flaunted; "don't care a feather or a fig!" A morality of deferred gratification appears to put off the real me to another day, but I can't really postpone my life. No wonder that rock appeals to teenagers, a stage on life's way when one seems to be full grown, yet stuck in a nest of economic and social deferrals and dependencies. Enter rock music as a statement of fullness now! The adoption of animal names for Rock groups—Eagles, Beatles, etc.—is not accidental. Animals, unlike humans, lack future pretensions; there are no fish striving to be archbishops. Animals are all in all, just what they are; it is this "fullness of being" which rock seeks to recover.

Rock reminds critic Camille Paglia of the great mystery religions. It is mystery even on its surface. Tin Pan Alley types like myself complain that they can't understand the words. But that is the point; like the cries and shouts of the Bacchantes, these noises suggest more than they can say until finally even the words give out and the crash of sound prevails. Rudolph Otto described the holy as *mysterium, tremendum, et fascinans*: a good description of a major rock event. The sound and the effects are tremendous and fascinating. The mystery evoked is a self, the Whatever-It-Is that is "going your own way." The rock 'n' roll self is not the moral self



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which is always beyond itself, deferring the present for the future, weighing and assessing the course of action. The rocker's self is the whole present reality, the very feel of present existence.

If sexual deferral is an important symbol for the music of morality, flaunting sexuality is an important symbol for the mystery in rock 'n' roll. Whatever else one might say about sex, it is an overwhelming experience of presentness. One of the reasons that moralists are so suspicious of sex is its ability to waylay the distancing and appraisive stance which is required for moral effort. Rock aims to get moral appraisal out of the way: Elvis Presley starts off the rock revolution on the proper note with his first big hit, "It's All Right, Momma!" Momma's moral injunctions are put aside.

I would like to propose a proper synthesis of morality and mystery, but the exact synthesis eludes me. My initial sympathy is with the rockers. I am inclined to believe that the spiritual journey is "rough, harsh, hard to follow," and that Father Chuck's world is only charming fantasy. In the long run—and the short run—you have to "go your own way." As the old black spiritual puts it: "You got to walk that lonesome valley by yourself; ain't nobody here gonna walk it for you...." There is something fundamentally out of kilter in a view which translates Christianity into nothing but moral injunction. I tell you the story of Christianity: a zealous peasant preaches a message of mercy and forgiveness, he is betrayed, abandoned, tortured, and put to a cruel and horrible death only to rise above death through God's almighty hand—and by the way, he didn't approve of premarital sex. I fear that this is the religious distillation of *Going My Way* and all too many traditional Sunday sermons.

Rock with all its excesses has the advantage of inhabiting spiritual territory, a territory where despair and hope, absolute loneliness and transcending love can abide. It is easier to think of converting a sexually passionate Augustine to burning Christian belief, than turning Father Chuck into Saint John of the Cross.

It is easier to think of converting a sexually passionate Augustine to burning Christian belief, than turning Father Chuck into Saint John of the Cross.

But if rock opens into the life of the spirit, while O'Malley's moral musical messages do not, one has to assess the spiritual life expressed. There is certainly a strong current within rock of Sam Phillips's "disillusion." Death, like sex and drugs and the rocker's scream, accomplishes the fullness of being—there is nothing yet to come.

If that is the final message of the music, it is certainly unacceptable to Christian belief. Nevertheless, rejecting the rocker's world is not easy. The disillusion and despair which are everywhere expressed in the music only make sense in a world of hope and love denied. In the back of the minds of the most disillusioning rock tune is a belief that "peace, love and understanding" is the real meaning of life. The problem seems that there is no known way of getting there. Except for the music itself.

Except for the music itself: in the mystery which is at the center of the spirit, there is a paradox within anyone who creates and crashes out a great hymn of despair. The lyric says "despair," but the music can transcend despair in its very boldness and assertion. W.B. Yeats says that Lear is "gay" in the very depth of his suffering.

Finally, rock can only believe in artistic enactment; Christianity makes the bolder claim about reality. You can call yourself an Eagle, Door, or Stone, but one remains, alas, merely human. Humans have to work themselves up (or down) to the fullness of animal intensity, but the moment passes until the next dose or drum beat. Sexuality may be a symbol of fullness, but, unfortunately, humans cannot live in the innocence of animal sexuality. The fullness has to be human sexuality. Humans finally have to deal with the fact that the sexual other is a person—a category which transcends animal structures and the only one which validates a quest for peace, love, and understanding.

The story of Jesus claims that actual human life, not the bold artifice of rock, can express the fullness of being. The rock impulse recognizes the superiority of the world of the spirit, but finally there is no incarnation, no daily bread. The spirit is reached only outside ordinary daily life in drugs, ecstatic sex, overwhelming music. One longs for a world of peace and love, but there is no assurance that it can exist anywhere except in the right riff and set of chord changes. Finally, rock is an aesthetic passing as religion—not the first or last time that noble gesture has been tried!

T.S. Eliot, who of course knew nothing of rock 'n' roll, expresses in *The Four Quartets* a view which might encapsulate a Christian response to this music.

> For most of us, there is only the unattended
> Moment, the moment in and out of time,
> The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,
> The wild thyme unseen, or winter lightning,
> Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply
> That it is not heard at all, and you are the music
> While the music lasts.
> ...The rest
> Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought, and action.

Lacking incarnation, the spiritual world of some to-be-named rock group, Wild Thyme, cannot move to "prayer, observance, discipline, thought, and action."

How to resolve the dilemma presented by *Going My* [Moral] *Way* and "Go Your Own Way"? As I read the gospel message, "Go Your Own Way" remains fundamental in the sense of that black gospel hymn. Each person lives and dies the one life that is his or hers alone. There is a fundamental aloneness to being human; an aloneness that makes the animal warmth of sex and heavy metal a seductive anodyne. It also makes the moral message of O'Malley seductive. I lose

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myself in moral earnestness. That may be a better path in so far as morality is a distinctively human trait. Chastity as a symbol of human freedom is better than sex as an ardent retreat from care. But common morality cannot be used as a shield for the aloneness of the spirit. Mary Gordon concludes her account of Father Chuck as follows:

> [Father Chuck's] maleness is iconic, but it is a particular kind of maleness cut off from the implications of sexual demand. It is part of his vocation to make no demands, so he gives no ground, no place for anyone to stand. There is no *there* with Father Chuck.

If there is no *there* to Father Chuck, what is missing is the aloneness of the spirit. If sexual fulfillment is a traditional symbol of spiritual fulfillment, sexual demand, then, can be a symbol of spiritual need. Antiseptically cleansed of sexual demand, Father Chuck becomes spiritually neutered.

If the final word is "Go Your Own Way," a way that is "harsh, rough, hard to follow," Christianity at least says that one is accompanied on that way. Jesus is not the absent moralist who sets out the road map for life; Jesus is the one who comes with, on the same journey, living his own story which ends in loneliness and abandon. Yet he goes forward, and he goes forward alongside the Christian believer, so that his story of resurrection and my story exist for one another. There is a there to Jesus which is not present in the clerical figure of Father Chuck. Jesus and the lone believer are spiritually open for one another. In one of her mystical experiences, Teresa of Avila hears the question, "Who are you?" "I am Teresa of Jesus," she answers, "and who are you?" "I am Jesus—of Teresa."

The implications of the pop culture of rock music for churches are ambiguous. The *New York Times* ran a feature article "Rock Finds Religion Again" (January 2, 1994.) The author, Guy Garcia, noted an almost apocalyptic denunciation of empty materialism—themes which have been stated in more measured terms by John Paul II. But the "salvation" sought by a rock singer like Michael McDermott in his album *Gethsemane* is strictly personal, outside if not against the churches. In a song called "Leave It up to the Angels," McDermott sounds the broad theme of disillusion that runs through rock: "I'm frightened by the way I feel, maybe you are too/I'm losing faith in everything and everyone but you...leave it to the angels."

The implication for official Catholicism may be contained in McDermott's personal history. A former altar boy, he contemplated entering the priesthood but, he says, "[I am] too weak a person to ever be a priest." The ghost of the omnipotent, invulnerable Father Chuck haunts the church: far from an image of sympathy or salvation, he is—in rock idiom—a "real turnoff!" Only a narrative responsive to passion, loneliness, and defeat responds to the rocker's urge. The Gospels have such a narrative (though with a startling twist at the conclusion). A God so vulnerable may require vulnerable ministers of grace. □

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VOX POPULI

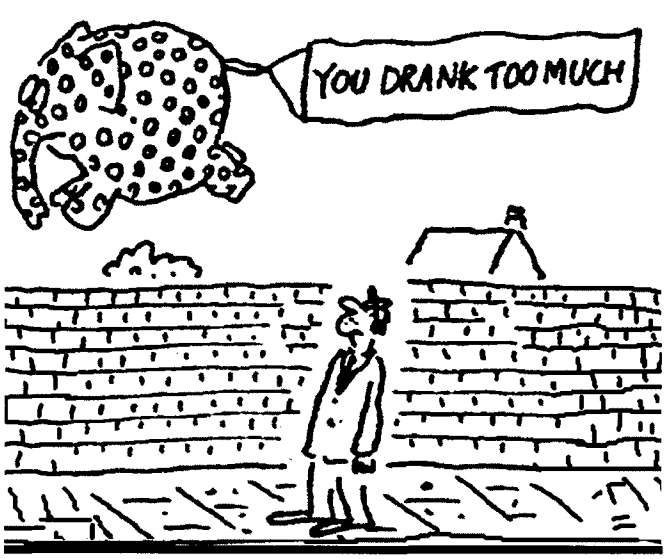
Michael O. Garvey

Early on a frigid morning, hours before a Chicago Bears game, a man leans against the hurricane fence separating Soldier Field's parking lot from Lake Shore Drive. He is grilling sausage patties with his brothers and a couple of close friends. They have fifty-yard-line seats, good winter clothes, bloody marys, a big thermos of scalding hot coffee, and hours of free time to burn. The parking lot is slowly filling up with Bears fans. Everyone is happy.

There are tears in his eyes from charcoal smoke, from a Lake Michigan-scraping easterly wind, and from a paroxysm of laughter brought on by an absurd story one of his brothers has just been telling. A carload of Bears fans honk and wave at him as they speed past, and he toasts them congenially, raising his red plastic cup in salute. His hands are thickly gloved against the wind, and big lumps of ice clack against each other in his bloody mary, the sound of them muffled by his cradling fist. "Go Bears!" he roars. At a somewhat more boisterous tailgate party nearby, a boom box has begun to play a tape of the Rolling Stones' "Honky Tonk Women," and the stark, chopping notes of the song's opening bass and drum lead seem to split the joyful moment to its exhilarating pith.

The man could dance. Does dance, in fact, in a tentative, middle-aged and utterly clumsy way, pretty much indistinguishable from idle toe-tapping, like that barely noticeable hayseed in the background of Brueghel's *Peasant Wedding*.

And he prays a little, too. In thanksgiving for the love of his brothers and friends; for the love of his wife and his children back home, still asleep under quilt comforters; for the peppery taste of still sizzling sausage patties as they burst greasily within split biscuits, hot against the tongue and teeth; for the startling tang of salty tomato juice, Tabasco, and vodka; for whitecaps churning the surface of a cobalt blue harbor across Lake Shore Drive; for the aromatic steam rising from the hot coffee as he blows the black surface of his cup, making miniature waves of his own; for being alive and in exultant defiance of this arctic morning around this hot charcoal fire with these people; for the goodness of life; for the glory of the God who brings such life and such moments about, and for his only begotten Son who forsook his very own life and its similar moments for sheerest and unfathomable love of every last distracted scumbag who would ever enjoy such moments so unworthily, so fitfully, and so ungratefully.



One prays when one prays, of course, and the point is not simply that grace is available even to an indolent middle-aged man with white trash values. To believe what the church believes about the Incarnation is to believe that there is finally no moment in human experience impervious to the love of God, no aspect of what we are and long for that this love can't search out, infuse, and transfigure. The point is the manner in which even the raunchy music of the Rolling Stones—the dissolute rock group whose aging members constitute a sort of Mount Rushmore of sexual and social depravity—can become an instrument of grace.

Which is why, it seems to me, that juxtaposing Catholicism and popular culture is a tricky thing. On which side of the ledger, for instance, will we place the liquefaction of the blood of Saint Januarius? Or the apparitions of Mary at Medjugorje? Or Mother Angelica? Or that Gregorian chant compact disk whose New Age cover shows a bunch of monks falling through a blue sky like rain à la René Magritte? Or the grotesque manner in which the flag is too often venerated in Catholic churches? Or most of what happens on any given football weekend at Notre Dame? Or frivolous liturgies? Or the tattoo I saw not long ago of Our Lady of Guadalupe? Or the pope's visit to Denver? Or the recent "Sixty Minutes" profile of the Catholic church in Los Angeles? Or the Catholic church in Los Angeles? Or the Catholic church herself?

Popular culture, from Pearl Jam to "Sesame Street" to the *National Review*, emerges from the volatile no man's land between the cultures of life and death which John Paul wrote about in *Evangelium vitae*. The plaintive ascension of a Jerry Garcia guitar improvisation, the poignant folly of the regulars in "Cheers," the splendidly ordered violence of a professional football game, are all products of that culture and all strain to express the truth about us and our plight. So, alas, does Ed McMahon when he bellows about the Publisher's Clearing House Sweepstakes.

Considered only as a cultural artifact, the average Sunday parish liturgy is not much better than the "Donahue" show and doesn't hold a candle to a Grateful Dead concert. But the Mass isn't merely a cultural artifact, nor is popular culture reducible to "Oprah." Mystery—the mystery of God, of the world, and of one's own being—animates even the dullest Mass, almost as if to illustrate that there is nothing

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in all creation so vulgar as to be prophylactic against grace.

The Catholic church, the bearer of the most irresistible mystery, withstands popular culture in much the same sense as a storm withstands thunder, a cornfield withstands topsoil, or perhaps even as a baby withstands the womb. □

MICHAEL O. GARVEY *works in the public information office at the University of Notre Dame.*

Robert Worth

In 1911 George Santayana quit his professorship in the Harvard Philosophy Department and left the United States for Europe, where he lived for the remaining forty-two years of his life. He left because what he called his "Catholic sympathies" were at odds with the intellectual atmosphere at Harvard. In a famous letter to his friend and colleague William James, he complained: "I wonder if you realize the years of suppressed irritation which I have passed in the midst of an unintelligible, sanctimonious and often disingenuous Protestantism, which is thoroughly alien and repulsive to me." Santayana believed that American culture was divided between a dull, censorious, and Protestant "genteel tradition" among the cultural elite—such as he had seen at Harvard—and a vigorously practical spirit among the masses. As a Catholic, he claimed to prefer the latter, though they "may ignore or even insult all that I most prize, but they please me nevertheless for their honest enthusiasm and vitality."

The genteel tradition represented the heritage of the older, Protestant America, but it was a heritage that would not fade away quickly or easily. Even in the 1920s and '30s, when countless artists and intellectuals were united in a bohemian rebellion against gentility, Santayana argued that a cold Protestant individualism continued to exert its curse on the upper echelons of American society. He continued to side with popular culture, the America of "football, kindness, and jazz bands," against the highbrows; and he rarely did so without invoking the Catholicism of his boyhood in Spain. Santayana did not believe in God, but the church remained his model for the possibility of harmonious relations between art and the lives of ordinary people. Catholicism became a code-word for living culture, for a community where art and ideas could flourish outside of museums, classrooms, and textbooks. It gave him an ethical context that liberalism lacked, and it allowed him to talk about fate in a way that Americans seldom did.

The church, of course, could not welcome the embraces of an atheist like Santayana. Contemporary Catholics may feel a similar bafflement and distaste for Madonna, Camille Paglia, and any of the other popular figures who desecrate church doctrine while claiming to draw all their inspiration from it. Yet the lingering allegiance of these apostates is instructive. Like Santayana, they are reacting against liberalism's failure to uphold resources of character, fate, or tradition. TV washes Americans in a daily bath of self-renewal, telling them no problem is so real that the right lawyer or the right therapy cannot "redefine" it back into the comfort zone. If anything characterizes current American pop culture, it is the cult of self-help. And this cult is a lineal descendant of liberal Protestantism's guarantee that the individual's encounter with God determines everything, regardless of health, circumstances, family, politics, or any other constraint. "You can be anything you want to be," American mothers still tell their children.

Yet in significant ways this is less true now than it ever has been, even for those "whitemales" who supposedly run the show. As the myth of national and personal omnipotence gradually fades into history, Americans may begin asking for a dose of the healthy fatalism that is so desperately lacking in the rest of their lives. There are indications that something of this kind has already begun to happen. Some of the pop culture that grows out of today's working class—the songs of Bruce Springsteen come to mind—speaks more to the need for community and a shared faith than to a merely reckless hedonism. Of course, much of the noise that throbs from our TVs and boomboxes is hostile to *any* religious tradition. But the Catholic church is very old, and TV and rock 'n' roll are very young. Sooner or later the world economy will start to persuade Americans that freedom has its limits, and that life gains more than it loses from the burden of community and tradition. □

ROBERT WORTH, *a frequent* Commonweal *contributor, is a graduate student in English at Princeton University.*

Suzanne Keen

The relation of two amorphous entities—Catholicism and popular culture—cannot be reasonably understood in units larger than the individual person. For if we can sometimes agree about what Catholicism means to American Catholics, we certainly will not agree about the lineaments and boundaries of popular culture. We are too much immersed in it, and Catholicism is too much a part of it. Of course pop culture is influenced by Catholicism: the derivative blasphemies of heavy metal music, grunge, and Madonna require the iconography of religious culture. So do the films of Wim Wenders, a contemporary allegorist. While my pop culture may have more subtitles in it, and my husband's more sports statistics, its significant relation to our Catholicism depends only on how much time and money it absorbs.

Though frequently urged by the church to live our lives counterculturally, we watch TV, listen to the radio, read magazines and catalogues, go to movies, rent videos, repeat urban myths, and spend our money on the material goods we ought to be able to live without. When we deplore movies on moral grounds, our Catholicism refracts differently. I fumed for days about the repellent message

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of *The Lion King* (that those nasty inner-city hyenas would despoil paradise for lack of a patriarch); my husband could not get beyond the adultery at the heart of *The Bridges of Madison County*.

As consumers and Christians, we must make our own judgments about popular culture's multifarious offerings and its methods of making us want more. Similarly, we must wonder why certain productions of pop culture "ought to be" offensive to us as Catholics, or as defenders of American family values. "Who says?" we ought to ask. "How do they know? And what are they getting out of it?" Too often attacks on the "messages" of pop culture get the message wrong, or take a naive view of the consequences of representation.

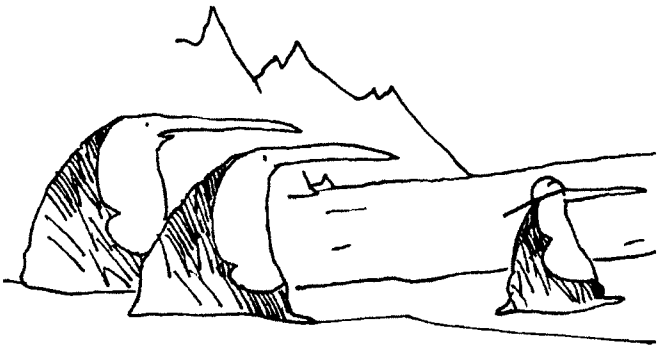
In extreme cases, alternative recommendations cast doubt on the cultural watchdog's competence (poor Bob Dole—do you think he actually saw *True Lies*?). To be convincing, condemnation requires understanding, which sometimes means looking at the interdicted object. In the end, one of the most striking contrasts between popular culture and Catholicism is the latter's defensiveness. If the two can be seen as antagonists at all, their rivalry takes the ludicrous form of a contest in which one of the parties (popular culture) fails to realize it's being attacked. I do believe that protesters can make big companies such as Disney or Time-Warner jumpy, but popular culture is a diverse and mercurial phenomenon, broader and less predictable than the big companies most often targeted by those who would circumvent the First Amendment by employing strategies of public shaming, rather than out-and-out censorship.

I'm not sure that there's a whole lot Catholicism can do about pop culture, although individual Catholics can use their time, attention, money, and intelligence like any other Americans. In the style of Hildegard of Bingen or Whoopi Goldberg in *Sister Act*, Catholicism can adopt aspects of popular culture in order to get the folk to sing along, but I confess a distaste for this derivative strategy. My own view is that if the Catholic church really wanted us to be countercultural, the priests would tell us to throw away our TVs. But as long as we're keeping them, we'll have to rely on our own judgment to recognize the pernicious fictions and to resist the enticements to consumerism. □

Suzanne Keen, *a regular* Commonweal *contributor, teaches English at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia.*

James Fisher

Urban-dwelling immigrants and their children, Catholics and Jews, created a new mass culture in the early decades of this century, but only the former express guilt over it, as though the accomplishment somehow gives scandal to standards of theological purity. In a symposium devoted to Patrick Allitt's *Catholic Intellectuals and Conservative Politics in America, 1950–85* (*U. S. Catholic Historian*, Winter, 1995), William L. Portier chides Allitt and other contemporary historians (present company included), in whose hands "American Catholic history becomes a history of Catholics living in American culture rather than the history of Catholics living consciously within the church's formal structures." Portier characterizes such work as "dare I say, 'trendy' and even, to some extent, fundable."



"He certainly keeps up with the trends."

Portier's jeremiad extends a creaky if enduring American Catholic tradition that equates spiritual virtue with resistance to consumerism, suburbia, rock 'n' roll music, and various mass-produced detritus served up by the "dominant" culture. Now apparently that critique includes "graduate schools that Catholics used to call 'secular.'" This strain of countercultural Catholicism has proven quite hardy despite its highly paradoxical foundation. For starters, Catholic critics of popular culture in the age of modernity were quite often converts and thus more implicated in a tangle with some presumed "other" America than immigrant or "ethnic" Catholics, who were less inclined to construct such oppositions as "sacred" versus "secular." It is perhaps fitting that in the postmodern era one need not even be Catholic to uphold this tradition: see for instance Robert Coles or the late Christopher Lasch, who viewed the church—or at least those precincts within it that had not succumbed to what Phillip Rieff called "the triumph of the therapeutic"—as one of the last holdouts against various modernist idolatries.

But any religious community that produces Jimmy and Dorothy Kilgallen, Jackie Gleason and Art Carney, Gracie Allen, Eleanor Powell, Bing Crosby, and Rosalind Russell should not have to ask what it can learn from popular culture. The ways in which Catholics have negotiated this interaction are fascinating. Shopping for yet another theory about the cultural origins of rock 'n' roll? How about this one: since the Scopes trial of 1925, evangelical Protestantism had grown increasingly defensive and could offer little resistance to the hegemony of East Coast Catholic and transplanted Hollywood Jewish producers of a national popular culture. Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, Carl Perkins, and Jerry Lee Lewis—all steeped in the traditions of Southern fundamentalism—blended gospel imagery and pop crooning

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with the rhythm and blues introduced to places like Memphis during the 1940s' black migrations: the result was a cultural revolution inspired by George Whitefield as much as Bing Crosby. But while Jerry Lee Lewis was soon locked in mortal spiritual combat with his cousin Jimmy Swaggart and the music was held hostage to broader internecine strife in the "Bible Belt," rock 'n' roll offered Northern Catholics like Bruce Springsteen access to the primal myths of his civilization, profoundly adding to a foundation he had built over the writings of Jack Kerouac, one of the first American Catholics to seriously explore the profoundly multicultural fabric of urban American life.

Does all this have anything to do with Professor Portier's concern for "Catholics living consciously within the church's formal structures," a challenge that may sound ecclesiological but actually exposes the fissure between theological and cultural approaches to Catholic America? At the risk of further collusion with the dominant culture, I would simply ask: What would happen if theologians began to apply their insights and methods to the subjects and texts of *found* Catholicism, down in those spaces where a furtive spirituality flourishes in defiance of stereotypical representations of "the church"?

I weary of being asked by non-Catholics what I think of the lifeless, boring, and wholly predictable movie, *Priest*. I tell them to go see Kevin Smith's *Clerks* instead (read "clerics"), in which young New Jerseyans working in a convenience store engage in ferocious post-Thomist disputation over the relative merits of space-adventure films, and treat sexual morality with the kind of hair-splitting earnestness not seen since the advice columns in the *American Ecclesiastical Review* of the 1950s (except in *Clerks*, "Dante" and "Veronica" skip the euphemisms: the language is downright gross, and while that's part of the message about these free-floating post-post Vatican II Catholics, if you were raised at all like me you'll be offended).

Kevin Smith has had all sorts of fun telling skeptical journalists that he is not only a former altar boy but a persisting Catholic and that his next film is to be titled *Dogma*. It will undoubtedly suffer from the self-consciousness of a "serious" treatment of religious concerns. But *Clerks* reminded me of the old 1940s' dreams of an integral Catholicism, in which one's entire universe was so infused with spiritual energy that distinctions between sacred and secular were obliterated (though Smith, admittedly, sure seems intent on making us endure a heavy dose of the dark side of rock 'n' roll Catholicism). A lot of people in the old days believed this goal entailed separation from the dominant culture. Maybe today, since there are so many of us doing so many different things, it just means being ourselves. □

JAMES FISHER *teaches at Saint Louis University. His* Dr. America: The Lives of Thomas A. Dooley, 1927–61 *will be published by the University of Massachusetts Press next year.*

IT'S TIME TO TAKE SIDES

Catholicism, yes; popular culture, no

John D. Hagen, Jr.

In his celebrated essay, "Defining Deviancy Down" (*American Scholar*, Winter, 1993), Daniel Patrick Moynihan sounded the alarm against passivity in the face of barbarization. He particularly deplored the nonchalance of many Americans toward violence in our culture. Moynihan quotes a New York trial judge, Edwin Torres:

> This numbness, this near narcoleptic state can diminish the human condition to the level of combat infantrymen, who, in protracted campaigns, can eat their battlefield rations seated on the bodies of the fallen....A society that loses its sense of outrage is doomed to extinction.

These words came forcefully to mind as I read *Commonweal*'s reviews of two arrestingly vicious movies: the infamous *Natural Born Killers* (October 7, 1994) and *Pulp Fiction* (November 18, 1994). Reviewer Richard Alleva can readily be pictured seated astride the smoking corpses in these films, in the posture described in Moynihan's essay, imperturbably assessing the aesthetics of the slaughter.

We are in desperate times when *Natural Born Killers* evokes more outrage in the Outland comic strip than it does in America's most prominent intellectual Catholic journal. A similar travesty occurred a year before, when *Commonweal*'s Frank McConnell gushed like a supermarket tabloid over the mayhem and obscenity of TV's "NYPD Blue" (October 8, 1993). The truth is that *Commonweal* exemplifies the thrust of Moynihan's essay. It seems to have lost all sense of outrage over any sort of turpitude in the world of the arts.

If ever a movie cried out to be critiqued in moral instead of aesthetic terms, it was *Natural Born Killers*. This film romanticizes mass murder. It shows two young nihilists diabolically slaughtering innocent people for fun. Then it uses all sorts of clever ploys to induce the audience to empathize with these predatory killers.

Director Oliver Stone stated candidly that *Killers* was meant to convey "the thrill of it, the joy ride from [the killers'] point of view." He paced the action and the dialogue at a frantic, maniacal pace, allowing viewers no time to reflect. His script gave the killers excuses (child abuse), a twisted emotional depth, and a certain amount of high-sounding discourse. Meanwhile, the victims were dehumanized, and policemen were depicted as brutal hypocritical goons. When the killers were captured, Stone had his police beat and stomp one captive in an aping of the capture of Rodney King. No effort was spared to make the moral anesthesia complete.

Even more outrageous was the way in which Stone's film

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was aggressively marketed to disaffected youth. Lurid posters of the murderers were plastered up in record stores. Among other atrocities, *Killers* shows the teen-age heroine's mother being bound, gagged, and burned alive, and her father being ferociously bludgeoned with a tire iron and drowned.

Alleva reviews this barbaric film in an absolutely clinical manner, without any moral comment whatever. "The victims are photographed in close-up at the moment of death," he observes, "and are made to look stupid, craven, repellent, and bereft of dignity." The "mystical murderer" [*sic*] delivers a mock-profound speech in which he argues that "all people deserve to die." Alleva matter-of-factly concludes: "the net effect of *Killers* is to make us feel that all humanity should be slaughtered for cravenness, vulgarity, and physical unattractiveness."

It is hard to conceive of an artistic project more utterly reprehensible. To romanticize mass murder, to cynically tempt young people to empathize with psychopathic killers, to "make us feel that all humanity should be slaughtered," is vicious conduct. An observer who can recognize all these elements, yet form no moral judgment about the film, has lost the capacity for outrage.

Is this what has happened to Alleva? He critiques this hateful film exclusively from an aesthetic standpoint: he faults it for a lack of style. "Trouble is, Stone hasn't achieved any such [surreal] style. Garishness, certainly, and plenty of high-tech display, but not style....Stone's dramatic strategies often turn out to be incoherent....Almost everybody is wildly overdirected." Et cetera.

Alleva's tone would be disturbing in any public commentary. But to find such a tone in *Commonweal* at a time when every Christian ought to be denouncing violence in our culture is incongruous in the extreme.

This incongruity becomes even more acute in Alleva's review of the ultraviolent *Pulp Fiction*. Here there is no equivocation. Alleva heaps unqualified praise on Quentin Tarantino for cleverness and polish as a director: "The script is put together with a jeweler's precision....The cinematic flourishes, the pop references, the movie-movie in-jokes, the glamour of the performers, the self-conscious hipness of the dialogue—all this cushions the violence, makes it bearable, and, yes, even glamorizes it."

Once again, the review is all about style, without the least tincture of moral critique. And *Pulp Fiction* cries out for moral denunciation, if ever a movie did. Tarantino notoriously traffics not just in violence but in sadism and preternatural cruelty. *Pulp Fiction* panders to the public with outrageous sadistic displays completely superfluous to its plot. Alleva blandly discusses this sadism as if it were just an ordinary element of style. *Pulp Fiction*, he notes, is packed with "a Tarantino specialty"—"heavy-duty, sadistically gloating speeches made by hitmen to their victims just before the bullet to the brain is dispatched."

Alleva does not even mention *Pulp Fiction*'s most outrageously vicious scene. Two homosexual sadists bind and gag two captives in a cellar. One captive is tortured and raped, while the other is left with a mute dehumanized slave (a sort of Jeffrey Dahmer zombie) in a suit and mask of black leather. A rescue takes place, during which one rapist is disemboweled with a samurai sword and the other is shotgunned in the genitals. As the fallen rapist screams, the victim gloats ferociously and tells him that he is going to torture him slowly to death "with a blowtorch and a pliers."

This is diabolical imagery. That it should pass undenounced in a review in a Catholic intellectual journal shows that we live in desperate times. Our culture is radically debased, and our intellectuals (conspicuously, Catholic intellectuals) seem oblivious to the problem. Rape, torture, unspeakable cruelty, murder for hire, murder for fun, all are chattered about with bland sophistication. If evil is "glamorized" successfully, we applaud, whereas if evil is merely made "garish" we disdain it.

The moral abdication of arts critics has been denounced by Michael Medved in his recent philippic on popular culture, *Hollywood versus America* (HarperCollins, 1992). Medved (a critic for the Public Broadcasting System) broke ranks with the critical establishment for its touting of a spate of sadistic movies in the early 1990s.

This nihilist boosterism calls to mind Hannah Arendt's account of the renegade elites of the Weimar Republic. Arendt describes a tacit alliance of avant-garde intellectuals with Hitler's lawless thugs, drawn together by contempt for bourgeois culture and determination to wreck it. The elite read the Marquis de Sade and applauded savage works of

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art, and many were gleeful when real savages erupted out of the earth:

> The temporary alliance between the elite and the mob rested largely on this genuine delight with which the former watched the latter destroy respectability....[I]t seemed revolutionary to admit cruelty, disregard of human values, and general amorality, because this at least destroyed the duplicity upon which the existing society seemed to rest....[T]he only political result of Brecht's "revolution" was to encourage everyone to discard the uncomfortable mask of hypocrisy and to accept openly the standards of the mob.

The same disastrous patterns are visible in American culture today. The "standards of the mob" discussed by Arendt—unabashed predation, ruthless cruelty—are flaunted and glamorized in the arts. Meanwhile, humbler folk confront increasingly uninhibited violence on the streets and in the schools.

Doesn't *Commonweal* facilitate such violence when it fails to speak out against nihilistic art? This failure is particularly striking in view of *Commonweal*'s tone on other social and cultural issues. *Commonweal* offers a forceful Christian moral witness on issues of politics, economics, the rights of the disadvantaged, and international justice. But it treats the arts from an absolutely secular and (generally speaking) completely amoral perspective. *Commonweal*'s reviews are erudite, witty, clever, diverting—but for the most part they are sophisticated persiflage of the sort one finds in magazines like *Harper's* and the *New Yorker*. They treat the arts as a sort of intellectual parlor game, without any social or moral ramifications or points of reference in the gospel.

As John Paul II has warned repeatedly, America is in the grip of a burgeoning "culture of death," and every Christian has a moral obligation to speak out against it. *Commonweal* should be up on the line beside Michael Medved castigating nihilistic art. If lines in the sand are not drawn against sadism, no lines will ever be drawn. If Christian intellectuals cannot muster outrage over brazen displays of cruelty in the arts, then the culture of death will devour us all. □

JOHN D. HAGEN, JR., *practises law in Minneapolis, Minnesota.*

Richard Alleva

I asked the editors to print the excerpts from my reviews side by side with relevant quotes from Mr. Hagen's article [*see* page 22] for two reasons. First I wanted to set the record straight for those *Commonweal* readers who aren't familiar with my columns. Second, our readers have a right to know exactly whom they're reading.

Mr. Hagen broaches issues that throb better heads than his

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Hagen vs. Alleva

John D. Hagen, Jr., on Richard Alleva

"[Oliver Stone's] script for *Natural Born Killers* gave the killers excuses (child abuse), a twisted emotional depth, and a certain amount of high-sounding discourse. Meanwhile, the victims were dehumanized...."

"Alleva reviews this barbaric film in an absolutely clinical manner, without any moral comment whatever."

Richard Alleva on *Natural Born Killers:*

"Perhaps the actors [Harrelson and Lewis] benefited from the fact that, by story's end, they are virtually Stone's surrogates, dispatching the rest of the cast with a relish that their creator, I fear, shares."

"The victims are photographed in close-up at the moment of death and are made to look stupid, craven, repellent, and bereft of dignity."

"Trash TV, tabloids, much American cinema and fiction, all contribute nowadays to a sickening buzz that is a perfect accompaniment to, and perhaps incitement of, the violence that is rending the fabric of American life. Did Oliver Stone hope to capture this buzz on film and amplify it so egregiously that his audience would finally beg for silence and sanity? Perhaps. But a really good orator knows how to silence a roomful of loudmouths. He lowers his voice."

John D. Hagen, Jr., on Richard Alleva

"Once again, the review [of *Pulp Fiction*] is all about style, without the least tincture of moral critique."

Richard Alleva on *Pulp Fiction:*

"When the hit men...saunter out of a restaurant at the film's conclusion, we know that one of them is doomed and the other saved. Whence the doom? Whence the salvation?"

"In *Pulp Fiction*, significance saves. Refusing to see the significance of events, dismissing all circumstance as happenstance, refusing to believe that you are undergoing your own destiny, can doom you. (So you have a destiny anyway—a horrid one!)"

or mine. Nowadays, many of Hollywood filmmakers are perpetuating infernos on screen that certainly aren't underpinned by any Dantean theology. Movies are now filled with violence cut loose from any moral context, sex unmoored in love or even passion, obsessions with bodily functions that express an adolescent boy's dismay with his own body. The results of this rage for sensation litter our movie screens. On behalf of my readers, I've walked through some of this debris but I haven't walked around it. If I walked around it by pronouncing simple-minded anathemas unsupported by analysis, if I didn't attempt to see into the heart of artistic folly, then neither I nor my readers would discover anything about those possibilities of art that artistic folly always sabotages.

I think my negative reviews pretty devastating but it is true that I don't employ much invective in them. There are two reasons for this. First, I think that most readers of *Commonweal*, being Christian, sane, and intelligent, don't have to be informed by me that sadism and smirky depictions of sex and bodily functions are deplorable. That is why I did not write, "The victims are photographed in close-up at the moment of death and are made to look stupid, craven, repellent, and bereft of dignity. And that's a very bad thing to do!" The reason I wrote the first sentence is that I felt the second and count on my readers to feel the same way without any prompting from me.

Second, invective is too often a substitute for analysis. When a movie doesn't work, I want to find out why it doesn't work, and I take the reader along on my investigation. Sometimes, the flaw at the heart of a bad movie is a moral flaw, and so my inquiry becomes, however superficially, a moral inquiry. Thus, I found *Cape Fear*'s failure rooted in Scorsese's obsession with obsessives; *The Piano* I found singularly lacking in curiosity about human motive, and—though Mr. Hagen would disagree—my revulsion from *Natural Born Killers* was prompted by its need "to make us feel that all humanity should be slaughtered for cravenness, vulgarity, and physical unattractiveness." Occasionally, such terrible need results in a major work like *Gulliver's Travels*. But the results of such need in *Natural Born Killers* is mere hideousness. On the cover of the October 7, 1994, issue, the editors labeled my review "an autopsy." That was correct, for I regarded the film as aesthetically and morally dead.

There. I've just used the A word. *Aesthetically*. Oh, decadent sign of our decadent times! Oliver Stone and Quentin Tarantino burn America down while Alleva fiddles away at aesthetics!

Question: how can you get at the moral sickness or health of a movie without examining its art or lack of art? That would be like a doctor trying to determine a patient's vitality without examining his or her body. Sooner or later, a movie's or novel's moral delinquency betrays itself through aesthetic delinquency. Plot illogic may signal unconcern with human motive. Mindlessly obscene dialogue betrays indifference to the substance of human speech, a moral as well as an aesthetic failing. Mindless editing choices or camera set-ups may reveal a basic lack of interest in the humanity of the situation posited by the script. Someone (maybe Truffaut?) once said that a well-timed close-up was a moral choice. That's true. Planning the sequence of events in a story can also show moral choice. Consider:

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Tarantino begins *Pulp Fiction* by showing Samuel L. Jackson savagely killing and ends the movie by showing Jackson scrupulously avoiding violence at considerable risk to his own life. Furthermore, the midsection of the story climaxes with a scene in which Bruce Willis rescues his worst enemy even though it's in his own best interest to let that enemy suffer a terrible demise. Clearly, the writer-director is trying to show us something and, lest we miss it, he's even expressed it in a line spoken by a minor character: "When you're together with someone in a pit of hell, you owe something to that person." *Pulp Fiction* is an adolescent, ultraviolent, foulmouthed romanticization of the gangster milieu. But it is also exhilarating, mind-teasing, breathtakingly well-made—and fundamentally moral. But Mr. Hagen refuses to see this because aesthetic matters like plot development are beneath him. He can see the isolated incidents of immorality that dot the landscape of *Pulp Fiction*, but he can't connect the dots to see the pattern. But without the pattern—no morality!

Commonweal readers have good reason to ask that this magazine's art critics write within a Catholic intellectual perspective. I have obliged with relish. The perception of the free choice between good and evil that is one of the tenets of Catholicism is also at the heart of most good drama. But I see no need to fog my writing with fulminations. I will persist in recognizing the morality in art by exploring the art in art. □

RICHARD ALLEVA *is film critic for* Commonweal.

Frank McConnell

Since my colleague Richard Alleva takes most of the heat from Counselor Hagen, and since he's a better writer than I am anyway, I'll be short.

Can art conflict with morality? That's the gravamen of Hagen's brief for the prosecution, and the answer is yes, he's right, of course it can—and often does. Plato banished poets from his Republic because they told gnarly stories, Kierkegaard couldn't forgive himself for loving Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, and Tolstoy's late book *What Is Art?* exorcises about 90 percent of the world's literature as "un-Christian"—including his own greatest work. I have a helluva hard time forcing myself to reread that most nihilistic of all books, *King Lear*, to teach it, which I do every year.

"I don't know...it seems like nihilism isn't enough any more."

Tolstoy's mistake—and Hagen's, Plato's and Kierkegaard's—is terminological. Art can conflict with morality. So does the daily crap-shoot of just living: like, say, all the time. But art never conflicts with religion, just because—and if I don't believe this then I don't believe anything—all art *is* religious. Art, said Amiri Baraka back when he was LeRoi Jones, is "whatever makes you proud to be a human being." And religion, says Karl Rahner in *The Practice of Faith*, is the conviction "that it is meaningful for a mere human to speak into the endless desert of God's silence."

So is everything allowed, or should "Christian intellectuals muster outrage over brazen displays of cruelty in the arts"? Well, in the first place, any outrage you have to "muster" isn't really outrage, is it? Art doesn't occasion outrage: it demands it. And yes, alas, everything *must* be allowed. In his story "The Secret of Father Brown," Chesterton tells us his little priest can solve crimes just because, in his own imagination, he too can envision the most monstrous evil. The politically correct Sherlock Holmes—and Hagen—want to ignore all the devils and thereby cleanse the world. Brown wants to understand them and thereby—it's not too strong a word—redeem the world.

Mind you, I hated *Natural Born Killer*. (Haven't seen *Pulp Fiction*—John Travolta gives me gas.) But I hated it because it was *too* moralistic. Come on: Oliver Stone, who is only slightly more subtle and ironic than a breath mint, gives us quick-cut after quick-cut of loony carnage, all the time nudging us and whispering, "*See* how desensitized you all are to the unspeakable? *See* how TV and movies have rotted your stupid, stupid minds?" If Hagen only knew it, he and Stone are allies. And it's just dumb to say that some cretins watch *Natural Born Killers* as a training film. Of course they do: they're *cretins*! I know a guy who thought (thinks) *The Great Gatsby* is about how the Jews want to take over everything. And do *you* want to take Jeffrey Dahmer to the matinee of *Silence of the Lambs*? Prophets don't get points off for idiot fans.

Okay. Let's get it straight that representations of violence have not, that's *not*, proved a correlation to real violence, otherwise the race would have self-destructed about the time of the *Iliad*. And the role of the "Christian intellectual"—unless I was misinformed by the Xaverian Brothers and the Fathers of the Holy Cross—is to find and honor God and man in the paradisal sewer of the world, not apart from it. "Art cannot make us want to be good, but it can preserve us from the illusion that we already are": that's W.H. Auden, writing in *Commonweal* under the name "Didymus," in 1942.

Brother Hagen—with respect: you're righteous, but not right. Let me suggest, deferentially, that just as Christianity is humanity in its fullness, "Christian art" is simply art, like life, in all its glorious, scary, and redeemable grunginess; and that the *nihil obstat* and the *imprimatur*, though industrial byproducts of the religious imagination, are essentially inimical to the holy thing that spawned them. □

FRANK MCCONNELL *is media critic for* Commonweal.

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A conservative proposes

Virtually Normal
An Argument about Homosexuality
Andrew Sullivan
Alfred A. Knopf, $22, 209 pp.

Margaret O'Brien Steinfels

The key word is argument, actually make that plural; here are four arguments about homosexuality that Andrew Sullivan engages with intelligence and vigor. Editor of the *New Republic* and an English Roman Catholic, Mr. Sullivan has written a book that will exercise the wits of editors, columnists, dinner-table dissenters, moral theologians, and all others who think that thinking matters. Some may find themselves irritated by his way of proceeding and yet instructed, even moved, by what he has to say.

Sullivan delineates and argues with four approaches to the array of issues surrounding homosexuality: "prohibitionist," "liberationist," "conservative," and "liberal." American readers will be distracted by his British spin: What he calls conservative would accurately describe many U.S. liberals. Many U.S. conservatives, especially those on the right, would more likely call themselves prohibitionists. Course corrections are required as you read along.

Sullivan disclaims an identification between these approaches and any particular groups, but his well-drawn examples give substance to his points. The prohibitionist view, for example, is represented by the Vatican's 1975 and 1986 statements on homosexuality. Never has "The Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons," written by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, been treated with such generous regard by someone who disagrees with its conclusion that a homosexual orientation is "an objective disorder." In an exegesis of the words "pastoral" and "person" in the letter's title, Sullivan points out a shift in Catholic thinking, beginning with the acknowledgment in the 1975 statement that homosexuality may be part of a person's nature and not, as some prohibitionists think, the sinful inclination of heterosexuals to engage in homosexual acts. Thus, Ratzinger says, homosexual persons deserve the church's pastoral care.

But, argues Sullivan, once the church says concedes that a homosexual orientation is real, it is caught up in the dilemma of showing "how something that seemed to occur naturally could still be profoundly unnatural, and against the end of God's creation." In this book at least, Sullivan wants to engage a political argument, not resolve the church's moral dilemma. In the American context, of course, the politically strongest prohibitionists are not proponents of the natural law but Protestant fundamentalists whom Sullivan writes out of the public forum with a scriptural exegesis that literal-minded, and some other, readers of the Bible are not likely to find convincing.

Turning to the liberationists (for whom homosexuality "is a construct of human thought, not an inherent or natural state of being" and for whom "there are no homosexuals, merely same-sex acts"), Sullivan links the ideas of Michel Foucault to the political dramatics of Act-Up and Queer Nation. Since, in that view, sexual orientation is not an innate characteristic, but a choice, these groups' "deployment of shock," in desecrating churches and outing closeted gays, repudiates the idea that a *polis* has anything at all to say about homosexuality. The antipolitical politics of radical gay groups is an "attempt to subvert the established heterosexual order," in the name of a larger sexual revolution.

There is an eccentric congruence between some liberationists and some prohibitionists over whether people choose to be homosexual, but each advances a strong and generally opposed moral position. Sullivan believes both groups have weak political arguments, some liberationists having none at all, so it is to conservatives and liberals that he turns for his real political debate.

The conservative argument—and the one that seems most fully to reflect Sullivan's own sparring partners—is not, he cautions, that of right-wingers or prohibitionists, but of a species of liberal who accepts the premises of the liberal state (liberty, pluralism, freedom of speech and action), while seeing politics as a process that gives preference to some cultural and moral values over others. Here Sullivan surveys the views of Oxford natural law philosopher John Finnis and Harvard psychologist E.L. Pattullo, who counsel private toleration and public disapproval of homosexuality in order to discourage heterosexual "waverers" and protect the family. Sullivan counter-argues with a conservative argument of his own: the increasingly public and political character of homosexual life has eroded the private-public distinction; conservatives, therefore, ought to work "toward an alliance with conservative trends among homosexuals" precisely in order to protect the social fabric of society.

When it comes to liberals, Sullivan expends much of his argument on the "illiberal" creation of affirmative-action programs. "A good-faith attempt to en-

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hance freedom for all by restricting the freedom of a few" ends, he argues, in reinforcing the very victim status that liberalism should be most concerned with eradicating for African-Americans, Hispanics, etc., as well as for homosexuals. A good liberal of the classic sort "refuses to see the state as a way to inculcate virtue or to promote one way of living over another; the state has no role in promoting understanding or compassion or tolerance, as opposed to toleration, or indeed to celebrate one set of 'values' over another." Though that sounds more libertarian than liberal, Sullivan acknowledges that the liberal tradition has advanced the cause of "minorities." For Sullivan, however, the real lesson of the civil rights movement "was not its panoply of complicated and cumbersome laws," but a demonstration of the value of individual virtue: "It is courage that gets noticed, and courage that changes the world. The pain of the homosexual experience requires that kind of catharsis to be healed."

This final point reminds us that the argument about homosexuality between most homosexuals and most heterosexuals goes on even more intensely among homosexuals themselves. It is liberationists and liberals that have dominated the latter debate; while the debate between homosexuals and heterosexuals often takes place on the terrain of prohibitionists and conservatives. Part of Sullivan's achievement in *Virtually Normal* lies in his coherently rendering each of these four positions with their best, not their weakest, arguments. Though some may read these chapters as a kind of intellectual game, Sullivan never strays far from the reality that this is a debate in which real lives and important values are at stake.

To these core chapters, Sullivan has appended an opening and two closing chapters. The prologue briefly recounts his own experience at uncovering and accepting that he is homosexual. Today this kind of declaration is *de rigueur*—from whence does he speak?—but here it is made with discretion and a disarming refusal to pronounce on the origins, percentages, characteristics of gay men or women. In other words, he refuses to stereotype homosexuality, his own or anyone else's. This unpretentious but honest approach contributes to the tone and spirit of the four chapters that follow; whereas the last two chapters call them into question.

Sullivan, here directly arguing in favor of gays in the military and gay marriage (and divorce!), loses his acumen in setting forth a political justification, even failing to distinguish the very different political and moral provenance of the two issues. The family precedes and transcends the state. The appearance of military force is usually congruent with the state's emergence and with its continued existence. Sullivan argues that the military is a badge of citizenship and openly homosexual persons should be allowed to serve. But when President Bill Clinton pressed the issue, Congress and the

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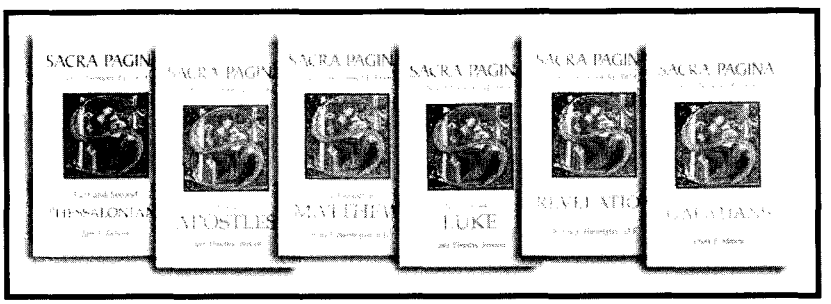

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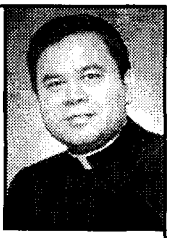

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military handed him an apparently unworkable compromise, "Don't ask, don't tell." With that, the issue departed the realm of political policy, as such, leaving it to the courts and to a constitutional or, perhaps as with abortion, a pseudo-constitutional resolution.

What of gay marriage? Same-sex marriage is deeply counter-intuitive for most people and it is hard to imagine the argument that will overcome this. Of course, "counter-intuitive" is not an argument, but an immediate cognition, in this case, that heterosexual and homosexual unions are radically different—dare I say, teleologically different. Stability and fidelity—yes, these are good things. And yes, homosexuals and lesbians will find themselves domesticating and even parenting. But does this constitute marriage? Sullivan writes: "Marriage is not simply a private contract; it is a social and public recognition of a private commitment. As such, it is the highest public recognition of personal integrity. Denying it to homosexuals is the most public affront possible to their public equality."

Sullivan believes the "liberal state" should license homosexual unions. But his "liberal state" is a rhetorical fiction, a polity concerned not with ends but with means that will insure individuals the equal opportunity to pursue their own ends. In such a fictitious state, perhaps marriage licenses should not be issued at all, to anyone—heterosexual or homosexual—since by definition the "liberal state" has no interest in preferring marriage, or in recognizing something as nebulous and value-laden as "personal integrity." Wouldn't prenuptial agreements and domestic partnerships, which Sullivan argues against, better convey the contractual underpinnings of his liberal state?

Our own nonfictional constitutional democracy, on the other hand, has a keen interest in the ends of marriage—in "licensing" men and women to form marriages into which children are born, cared for, educated, and raised to be good citizens, and in which a stable family provides material and spiritual resources for both its members and its community. Indeed, homosexuals too have an interest in these ends. In the United States then, a marriage license is not a prize for good citizenship, not a recognition of personal integrity, not a symbol of equality. It is the hope and provision for future citizens. Obviously this does not exhaust the meaning of marriage, nor do exceptions (childless couples) or failures (a high divorce rate) refute its ultimate purpose.

In the final chapter, "What Are Homosexuals For?" Sullivan, in commending the value of homosexual union, ends in poking holes in his own case. He believes homosexuals or lesbians in same-sex unions can lead good lives, indeed, heroic lives, but that heroism, in some respects, derives from their differences from heterosexuals. "Certain necessary features of homosexual life lead to certain unavoidable features of homosexual character": mimesis, irony, and childlessness (which frees homosexuals and lesbians to serve in "broader parental roles"). Add to that the same-sex segregation in friendships and socializing he describes. And finally this: "Same-sex unions often incorporate the virtues of friendship more effectively than traditional marriages; and at times, among gay male relationships, the openness of the contracts makes it more likely to survive than many heterosexual bonds. Some of this is unavailable to the male-female union; there is more likely to be greater understanding of the need for extramarital outlets between two men than between a man and a woman; and again, the lack of children gives gay couples greater freedom. Their failures entail fewer consequences for others." But then, why call it marriage at all?

The inconsistencies of these final chapters notwithstanding, *Virtually Normal* is a book to take seriously. It is most engaging at those moments when the agonistic stance of the debater shifts to reveal a man who like the rest of us is trying to understand "how we as a society deal with that small minority of us which is homosexual." □

MARGARET O'BRIEN STEINFELS *is the editor of* Commonweal.

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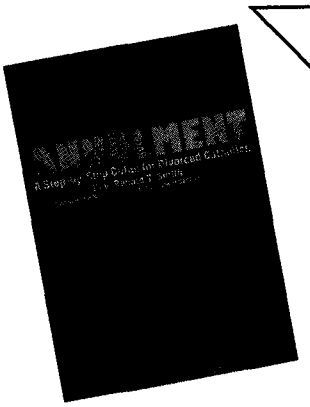

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Lawrence S. Cunningham

Asceticism (Greek: *askesis*) meant, in the ancient world, the self-denial demanded of those who were in athletic training. It took on the added sense of a philosophy of life which prized moderation, withdrawal from the competitive world, a dietary regime, frugality in style of life, and a spirit of detachment. Toward what end? For some, like the Stoic emperor Marcus Aurelius, it was a means toward a rational life. For others, like some devotees of Cynic philosophy, it was a vehicle for both social criticism and a "deconstruction" of the prevailing mores of a society.

James Francis points out, in a very well-written and closely argued work, that the second-century Roman Empire was the highpoint of the *pagan* ascetical movement. A close look at that movement tells us a good deal about a number of very interesting issues: why the Christians were persecuted; about the underpinnings of the anti-Christian polemics coming from a writer like Celsus at the end of the second century; and as a matrix for understanding the phenomenon of monasticism which is basically a late third-century movement flowering in the fourth. A final reason why the subject is interesting, even if our author only touches on it in passing, has to do with the claims of certain biblical scholars that there is a parallel to be found between the life of Jesus and that of some of the wandering Cynic philosophers.

Subversive Virtue: Asceticism and Authority in the Second Century Pagan World, by James A. Francis
Pennsylvania State University Press, $32.50, 222 pp.

Francis devotes separate chapters to a close reading of the works of Marcus Aurelius, Lucian, Apollonius of Tyana, and Celsus. He argues that there was a two-tiered polemic going on in these works. One was the conviction that a certain sensible *askesis* led to a balanced and rational life which led to an appreciation of traditional moral norms and social stability. It was from that position that some polemicized against, for instance, the Christians who were seen as irrational, undermining Roman *pietas*, and disturbers of the social order. Francis does not hesitate to say that this view, expressed by Marcus Aurelius, not only contributed to the severe persecutions of the third century but was a philosophical worldview that lent itself to a totalitarian view of politics.

By contrast, the wandering Cynics, with their show of alleged miraculous powers, their disdain for conventional living, and their propensity to stir up people against social norms, were deviants worthy of the most strenuous condemnation. Lucian's *Death of Peregrinus*, for example, sketched the "character type" of such a charlatan (Peregrinus is linked to the Christian movement) in order to mount a vicious polemic against them. Celsus in his *True Doctrine* (which we know only through citations from his third-century antagonist, Origen), in fact, vilified Jesus for being just that kind of rabble-rouser.

In his concluding chapter, Francis notes that the rise of Christian monasticism in the fourth century can be seen as an institutionalization of the anarchic impulses brought forth from a following of the Gospels' "hard sayings." Meanwhile, conservative Christians wanted to harmonize the "hard sayings" by spiritualizing them.

In dialogue with, and commenting upon, the works of such noted scholars as Robin Lane Fox, Peter Brown, Patricia Cox, Elizabeth Clark, and others, Francis has written an illuminating work. He throws light on asceticism, the development of the monastic charism, and one matrix out of which Christianity was given shape. I liked this book very much.

Her Share of the Blessings was first published in 1992; we now have an inexpensive soft-cover version of a very good book. Unlike Francis who largely sticks to the second century, Kraemer provides us with a *tour de horizon* of women's ministry from the ancient Greeks through the patristic period. The first seven chapters focus on Greco-Roman religion. Attention is paid both to women's participation in goddess worship (Artemis, Hera, Demeter) and to the worship of male gods like Adonis and Dionysius, as well as Roman matronal rites and such syncretist cults as that of Isis. Chapters 8 and 9 study women in the rabbinical tradition and their leadership roles in the synagogues of the diaspora. Chapters 10 through 13 discuss the attraction of women to the Christian *religio* and their leadership roles in both heterodox movements (like Montanism) and in mainstream Christian communities.

Her Share of the Blessings: Women's Religions among Pagans, Jews, and Christians in the Greco-Roman World, by Ross Shepard Kraemer
Oxford University Press, $10.95, 275 pp.

This is, of course, a lot of territory to cover but, as her ample bibliography indicates, Professor Kraemer has read an enormous amount, synthesized it well, and, blessedly, writes a crisp, jargon-free prose. It is impossible to even summarize the evidence that she studies but some of her conclusions are worth noting. First, there seems not to have been any difficulty with women exercising priestly and leadership functions in the ancient pagan world. Equally, women seem to have had leadership roles in diaspora synagogues, but it is not clear if they were models for such roles in the early Christian *ecclesiae* or vice versa. Further, while we know that women baptized and taught in the early church, we are still not clear about their precise leadership roles nor the reasons why, in the post-Constantinian world, they were more restricted in their place(s) in the church.

The main arguments tendered to exclude women from leadership roles were rooted in the biblical doctrine of the subordination of women to men and the

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fact that God did not choose a woman to baptize Jesus, etc. However, Kraemer concludes, "In antiquity, no one argues that women cannot be priests because the priest represents Christ in the congregations and Christ came, necessarily, in the form of a male. Only later, in the Middle Ages, does this become a key weapon in the arsenal against women's ministry...."

Not everyone will be enamored of Kraemer's theoretical model of interpretation (borrowed from the anthropologist Mary Douglas) nor convinced in every instance of how she reads the evidence. But it is hard to think of a more useful work as a survey of the evidence—enhanced by very full notes, a good index, and a bibliography for further reading.

There is no Christian art which can be dated before A.D. 200. The conventional wisdom explaining this absence as well as the subsequent rise of art is that the Christians inherited the tradition coming from Judaism that was hostile to art in theory and practice. Pressures from below by the uneducated masses eroded the authority of the aniconic tradition, and the introduction of pictorial art was a compromise of the essential aniconic tradition of early Christianity. It is the burden of Finney's immensely learned book to show that the conventional wisdom is not right.

That there is no identifiable Christian art before A.D. 200 Finney concedes; that this absence is best explained because of prejudice against art Finney denies. His thesis is that it took a certain period for Christians to understand themselves as a separate culture since they had no long tradition, no separate language or costume, nor were they ethnically separate. Once they had a "culture," then they could, as a culture, acquire property. The pictorial decoration of that property and what anthropologists call a "material culture" followed. This culture jelled, as it were, in the period of the Roman Tetrarchy, which is to say, circa A.D. 200.

The Invisible God: The Earliest Christians on Art, by Paul Corby Finney

Oxford University Press, $45, 319 pp.

Finney sets out his argument against the standard consensus in microscopic detail. He denies that the "anti-art" polemics in the early patristic writings should be seen as the basis for an aniconic theology; rather, they should be seen as an antipagan polemic. Furthermore, he makes the very intelligent (and valuable) observation that one reason why Christianity spread is because it was able to take over elements of the regnant culture and put it to its own uses (which is the way, for instance, he "reads" the first products of Christian art).

In the final section, Finney examines in fine detail the first examples of Christian art, both in terms of style and iconography. Some may find his final pages daunting, peppered as they are with lines in Italian, French, Latin, German, and Greek (he does not translate his epigraphical citations, which led me to my dictionary more than once). But given his thoroughness and his abundant bibliographies, this is a treasure trove for further explorations.

It has taken me a long time to work my way through this dense volume but I must say the effort was well worth it. I would also like to pay tribute to the fine prose style of the author. He is a pleasure to read, even when the material at hand is rough going.

For decades, the Franciscan Institute (address: c/o Saint Bonaventure University, Saint Bonaventure, NY 14778, for a catalog and ordering information) has produced critical editions of the writings of medieval Franciscans such as William of Occam. They also publish some serious, but popularly accessible, works which treat various aspects of the Franciscan charism. Like Cistercian Publications and the Institute of Carmelite Studies, the Franciscan Institute publishes works (inexpensively!) which mine the legacy of a given religious tradition.

Father Norbert's study of the Christology of Francis would fit into the category of a book solidly built on careful research but aimed at a general audience. The writings of Francis are a mélange of letters, liturgical texts, brief exhortations, rules for the religious life, glosses, and paraphrases of prayers. It is almost impossible to date the major-

The Teacher of His Heart: Jesus Christ in the Thought and Writings of Saint Francis, by Norbert Nguyen-Van-Khnh, O.F.M.

The Franciscan Institute, $15, 253 pp.

ity of them. Most come, very likely, from the last years of his life. Father Norbert had the very good idea of combing through the writings (using the lives only in an ancillary fashion) to see if he could construct a systematic and coherent picture of the Christ of Saint Francis. He had the further good idea of contextualizing that search in terms of the regnant art of the time. Curiously, however, he dwells on twelfth-century Romanesque in France instead of what I would have looked at: the Italo-Byzantine tradition of Italy, which is what Francis would have been most familiar with.

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Norbert's book seeks out the various images and titles that Francis uses, sets them against the world of twelfth-century piety (especially as it comes from Bernard of Clairvaux), and then studies in detail how Francis accepted and/or enlarged the images he uses. This close analysis yields not only the range of Christological images used by Francis but some surprising insights into his religious worldview. Let me cite one specific example. Norbert notes that Francis never uses the word "Bible" or "sacred Scripture" but refers to "word of God" or "words of God" or "written words." On close analysis, the "words of God" seem to mean three things: (1) the words of eucharistic institution; (2) the words of liturgical texts; (3) the preaching of priests in church. Is it too far off the mark to suggest that Francis, who was not a conventionally learned man (he described himself as *idiota*—unlettered) heard the word of God, not through Bible reading, but through close attention to the liturgical and homiletical life of the church? And does it follow that that is probably the way most people heard the word in those days?

It is also interesting that Francis uses the verb *administrare* to speak both of the administration of the Eucharist (again, Eucharist is a word he never uses; he always refers to the "body and blood of the Lord") and the word of God to the faithful. Francis was more liturgically sophisticated than we would think at first glance.

There are so many useful things in this lovingly written book that the writings of Francis, which on the surface seem flat and conventional, need to be read in a new light. I have read and thought about the early writings of and about Francis for a long time, but books like this help me to reach deeper into the life of the *Poverello* and for that I am grateful. □

LAWRENCE S. CUNNINGHAM *teaches theology and chairs the department at the University of Notre Dame.*

CORRESPONDENCE

(Continued from page 4)

gains ground in every jurisdiction in the United States over the next ten years, the likely long-term consequence will be a weakening of respect for life, even within the medical profession, and we'll have to live with it. If we can.

"By their fruits you will know them." We should ask consequentialists to take a longer view of what may result when we dismiss the notion of moral absolutes as outdated and irrelevant.

PETER J. RIGA
Houston, Tex.

Total war is wrong

Twenty years ago,while serving at the U.S. Navy base in Sasebo, Japan, I visited Nagasaki, just thirty miles south of the base. Filled with horror at the realization of what our armed forces had done—and were prepared to do again—I filed for and received an honorable discharge as a conscientious objector. Standing at "ground zero," I understood why the entire leadership of our Catholic church was moved to declare, at the Second Vatican Council: "Any act of war aimed indiscriminately at the destruction of entire cities or of extensive areas along with their populations is a crime against God and man himself. It merits unequivocal and unhesitating condemnation."

In his August 18 article, "Hiroshima and Nagasaki: One Necessary Evil, One Tragic Mistake," Bruce Loebs honestly admits that he does not base his view on the traditional just-war criterion of "noncombatant immunity." It is therefore not surprising to find him justifying mass killing and obliteration bombings—even if only once—in order to achieve the desirable goals of ending a war and saving lives (especially American lives). The end justifies the means.

Professor Loebs, of course, has every right to hold a position at odds with Catholic teaching, and *Commonweal*, of course, is not bound to publish only articles that reflect that teaching. But I would have been far less disappointed

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and saddened if I had found a centerpiece article in your magazine which reminded your readers of the church's unambivalent attitude toward weapons of mass destruction, rather than one that only repeated the conventional "wisdom" regarding those August days of infamy.

MICHAEL W. HOVEY
New Rochelle, N.Y.

The writer is coordinator of Peace and Justice Education at Iona College.

From the editors: Commonweal's positions are expressed in editorials. The issue of August 18 reprinted the editorial of August 24, 1945, an unequivocal condemnation of the use of atomic weapons against Japan. A second editorial, "Hiroshima 1995," reaffirmed that judgment and distinguished it from the views of Bruce Loebs. Our regular columnist J. Bryan Hehir analyzed Professor Loebs's argument and rejected it in favor of the just-war prohibition against total warfare.

Why print an article at odds with the magazine's position? We thought Mr. Loebs's history gave an accurate account of the role of the A-bomb in Hirohito's decision to surrender. Concluding that the use of the bomb was immoral is no reason to deny or rewrite history.

A major Irish poet

I always look forward to Lawrence S. Cunningham's "Religion Booknotes" in *Commonweal*, but must take issue with the passage in his column for the issue of June 2 in which he faults the *Modern Catholic Encyclopedia* for including "an entry on a minor Irish poet, Patrick Kavanaugh [*sic*]." In view of Kavanagh's treatment by the Irish church and the De Valera vice squad, it is ironic that a Catholic encyclopedia would include an article on him. But in fact he was probably the most important Irish poet between Yeats and Heaney. "The Great Hunger" (1942) was a major poem that is still influencing contemporary Irish literature.

James A. Broderick
Washington, D.C.

THE LAST WORD

THIS GIG'S FOR YOU

Tryon Baldwin

One morning last spring, as I left my building for work, I discovered a young woman dancing—well, actually, gyrating is more like it—on my front stoop. She wore very short cut-off blue jeans and a flowered-print halter top, and I first saw her through the glass front door of my building, from behind. It was only after I opened the door and passed by, pausing long enough to say "Excuse me," that I noticed the film crew in the street.

Like most New Yorkers, I'm normally oblivious to the film industry; it's not unusual, especially in my neighborhood, to stumble upon a group of people armed with cameras and boom mikes: "N.Y.P.D. Blue" is set in my precinct; parts of *Die Hard III* were filmed nearby; and finding an N.Y.U. film student is easier than finding a cop. Still, this woman was twisting on *my* doorstep, which doesn't happen everyday.

I should explain that I live in the East Village, near Tompkins Square Park, in a part of Manhattan that has undergone something of a hipster renaissance in the past few years as well-heeled arty types and dressed-down college kids have made it their home. Nose rings and tattoos abound, and Mohawked, leather-clad teen-agers, their bodies pierced in half-a-dozen ways, roam the streets reciting their group manifesto: "Spare change for a cold beer, man?"

At times, this "scene" can be a bit much, and a few months ago, as the weather warmed up and as more people began spending more time on the street and in the park, I started to think about moving—not just from the neighborhood, but from New York. Still, that morning, I was more intrigued than annoyed by the woman on my stoop, and I crossed the street to watch.

Looking back at my building, I saw that a young, broad-shouldered black man sat on the steps and played the bongos, while the dancer, a slim Hispanic woman, twisted and flailed behind him. I asked a lighting guy with a ponytail what the shoot was for, and he told me it was a Budweiser commercial, which made sense, considering the high-spirited aura of multicultural fun.

Earlier, when I'd exited my building and first seen this woman—her twisting hips, her shapely legs—I'd had the uncomfortable, though accidental, sensation of being a voyeur. But, from the other side of Tenth Street I saw her sashays and shimmies with fresh eyes: I wasn't a pervert; hers were made-for-TV moves, which meant that, in the larger view, she was shaking her hips for all the world, and that, of course, included me. Her flailing and her wide, "summer's-here-and-the-time-is-right-for-dancing-in-the-streets" smile, both were for me. Certainly it was okay if I gaped at the real thing; I might never even see the commercial.

After a few minutes, the director, a portly white guy in a windbreaker and a baseball cap, stopped the action and then stepped in front of the dancer and shook his booty in demonstration. He clapped his hands and swung his hips. I heard him tell her, "You're doin' great. Just stay with the beat."

The woman watched him and nodded to herself, then she walked a few feet down the block and practiced her moves *a cappella*. The black man set the bongos on the steps, stood, and stretched, and I decided it was time to go to work.

Now, at the end of summer, the street is quieting down somewhat, and I find myself looking back to that morning—the woman dancing; the film crew semi-circled around my front steps—and remembering that sense of vicarious excitement, that energy rising off the pavement that brought me to New York in the first place. Last spring, for those few minutes, I felt plugged into the life around me, connected with the world, happy to be right where I was. □

TRYON BALDWIN *is a free-lance writer living in New York City.*

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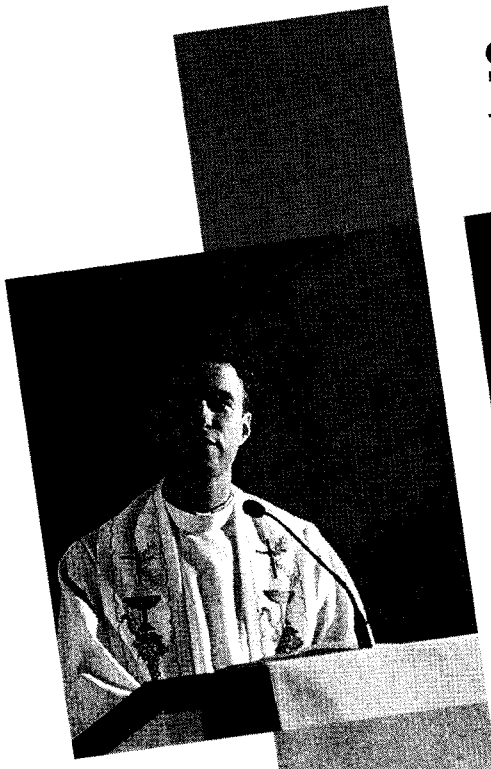

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